Koviloor Digital Library

AZHWARS

THE VAISHNAVITE SAINTS

11155
Q22

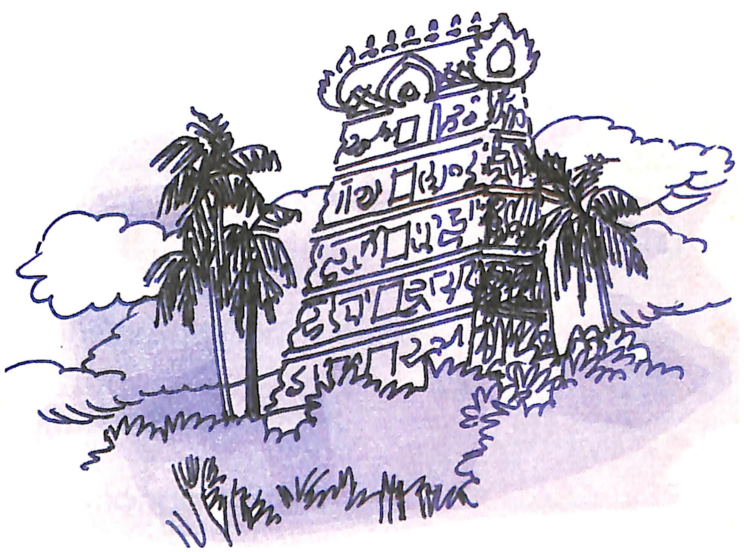
Koviloor Digital Library

Koviloor Digital Library

4-2

AZHWARS

THE VAISHNAVITE SAINTS



KOVILOOR ANDAVAR
A. No. 11155
LIBRARY, KOVILOOR

KALAKSHETRA PUBLICATIONS

Rs60/-

Koviloor Digital Library
COPYRIGHT © 2004
No part of this book can be reproduced
without written permission

First Print 2004

KALAKSHETRA PRESS
THIRUVANMIYUR, CHENNAI - 600 041
PHONE : 044-24911390

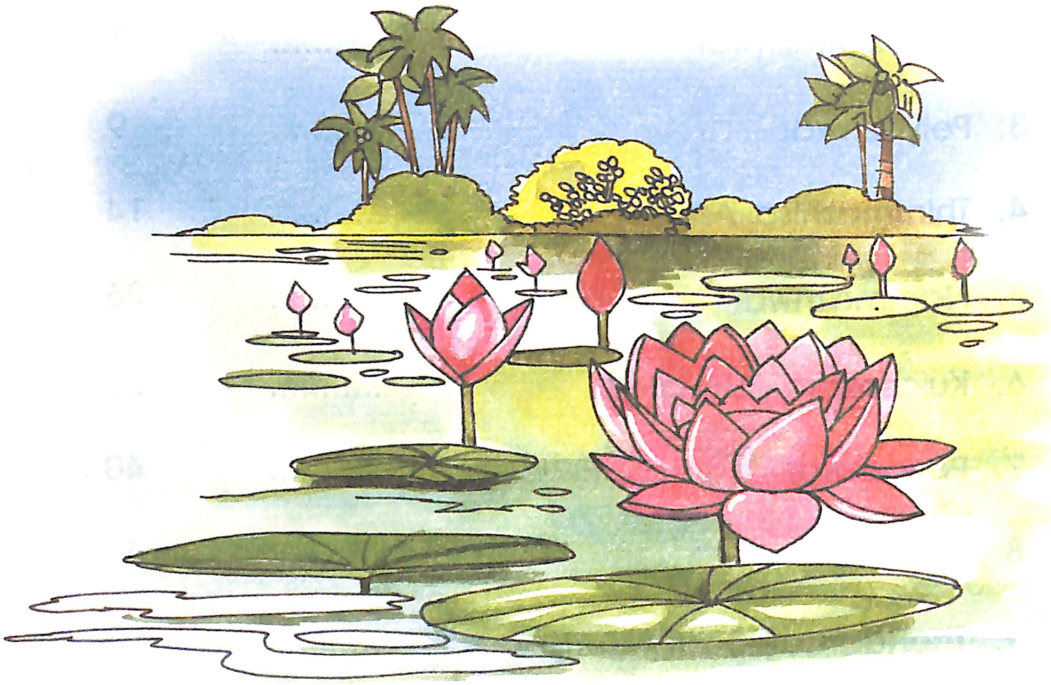
Koviloor Digital Library

Contents

1. Poigai Azhwar 4
2. Bhoodattazhwar 7
3. Peiyazhwar 9
4. Thirumazhisai Azhwar 14
5. Nammazhwar 26
6. Kulasekara Azhwar 33
7. Periazhwar 40
8. Aandal 46
9. Thondaradippodi Azhwar 53
10. Thiruppaanaazhwar 62
11. Thirumangai Azhwar 67
12. Madurakavi Azhwar 76

Koviloor Digital Library

Poigai Azhwar 1



Thondainadu was like a jewel in the crown of Tamilnadu, with its capital at Kanchipuram, which was also known as Kachi and Athiyur. Naturally endowed Kanchipuram was earlier the capital of the Chola kingdom and later of the Pallava empire. This town has several Siva and Vishnu temples and has been an important pilgrimage centre for hundreds of years. Thiruvekka and its Yadodkari (one who does as he promises) shrine is one of the Vaishnavite temples there. Near that shrine was the tank filled with beautiful lotus flowers, lillies and various other water plants and flowers, rendering the atmosphere pleasant with

Koviloor Digital Library

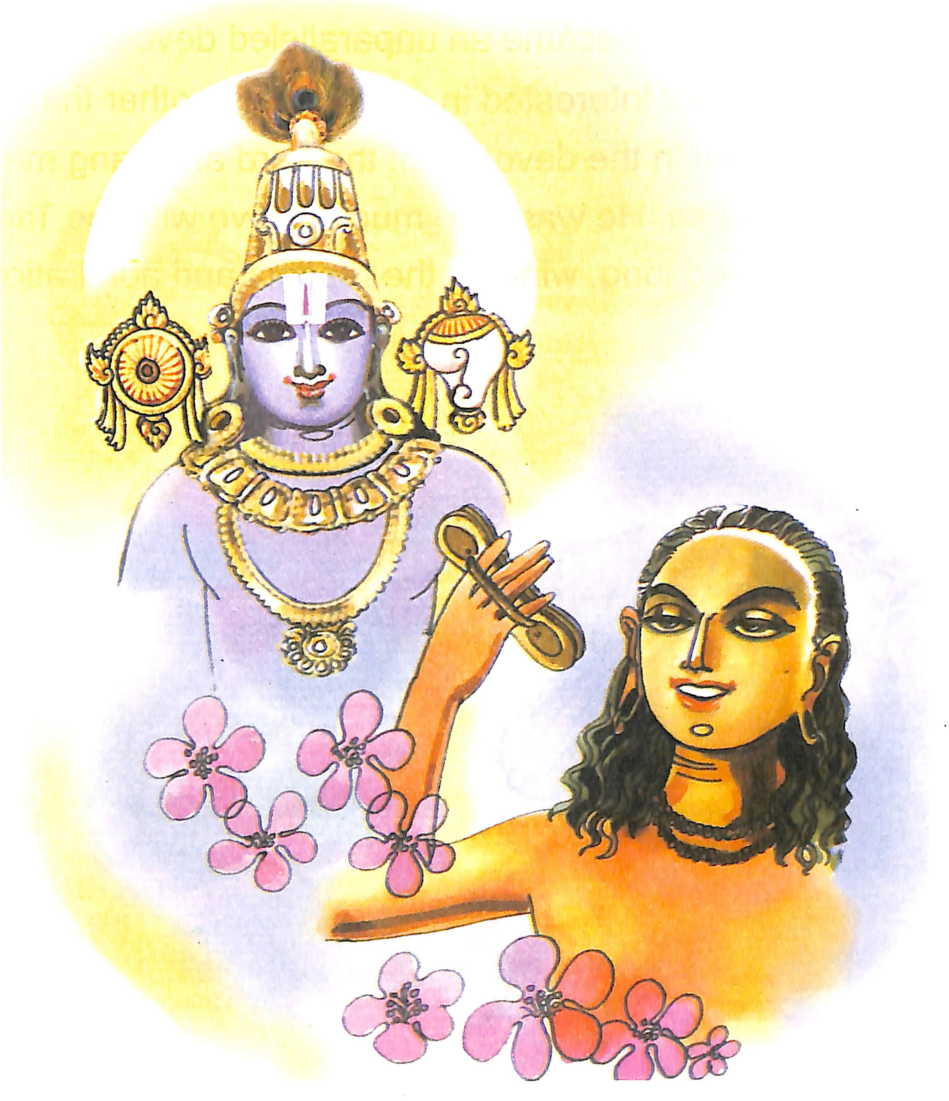
their perfume. The tank also had swans swimming around gracefully. In this tank, from a golden lotus was born a male child, who was intelligent, loving and an example of devotion to Lord Vishnu, in the Tamil year Siddharti during the month of Aippasi (October-November) on the eighth day after the new moon day, on a Tuesday. His birth star was Tiruvonam and he was believed to be the incarnation of the divine conch held in the hand of Lord Vishnu. As he was born on the tank, called 'Poigai' in Tamil, he was known as Poigai Azhwar.

He underwent a thorough education and realized there was nothing greater than the devotion to Lord Vishnu and dedicated himself to His service. He used to say that his mind was always thinking about Him, his tongue was always singing His praise, his eyes wanted to see only His beauty and his ears wished to hear only songs extolling Him. He would not desire others' property, not befriend unworthy persons, and nor worship any other god except Vishnu. But he also preached that a devotee of Vishnu did not have to hate Lord Siva, nor should a Saivite despise Vishnu. He also taught that the aim of the soul should be to merge with the Divine and the cause for all sufferings was being away from Him. Due to the Lord's will he met Bhoodhattazhwar and Peiyazhwar in an unusual situation.

Koviloor Digital Library

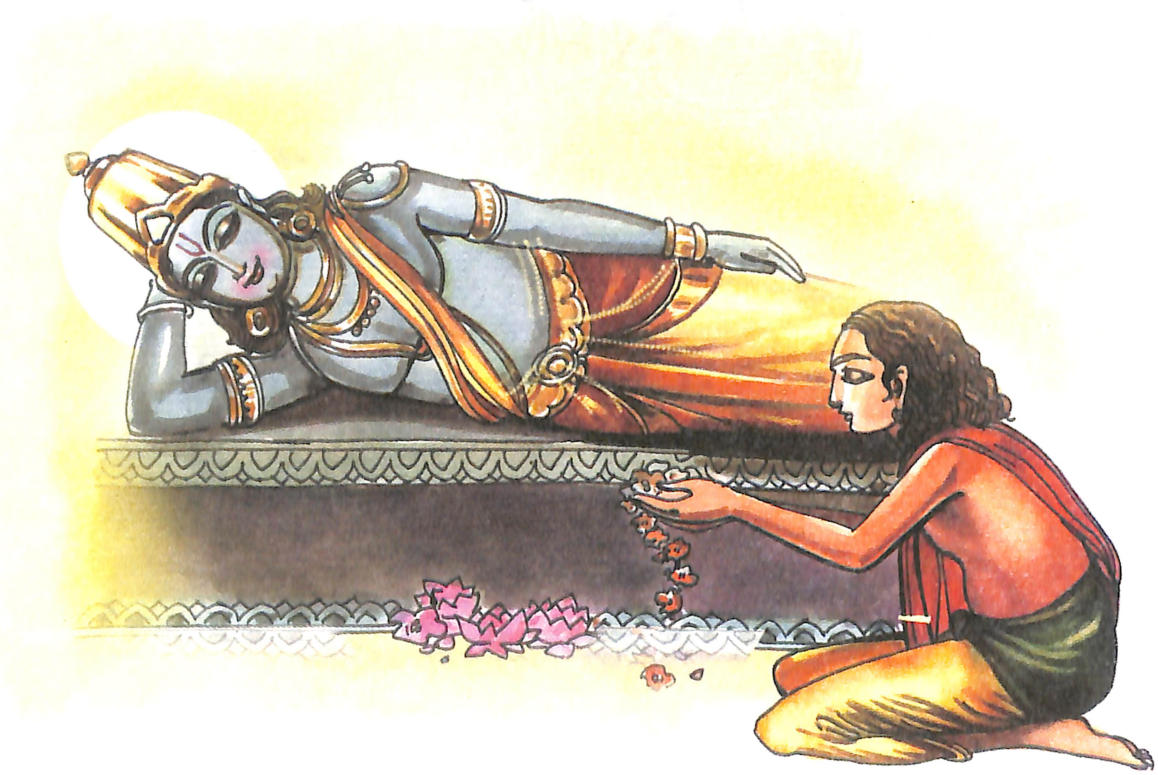
Bhoodattazhwar 2

In Thondainadu was a beautiful coastal town called Kadalmallai, which was later came to be known as Mamallapuram and Mahabalipuram. It had a port where ships from many other countries arrived with rare commodities and



thus it became a well known commercial centre. It was also a thriving centre for arts. In the temple here Lord Vishnu was depicted as lying on the floor, instead of the snake, and thus the place was known as 'Sthalasayana' (floor as bed).

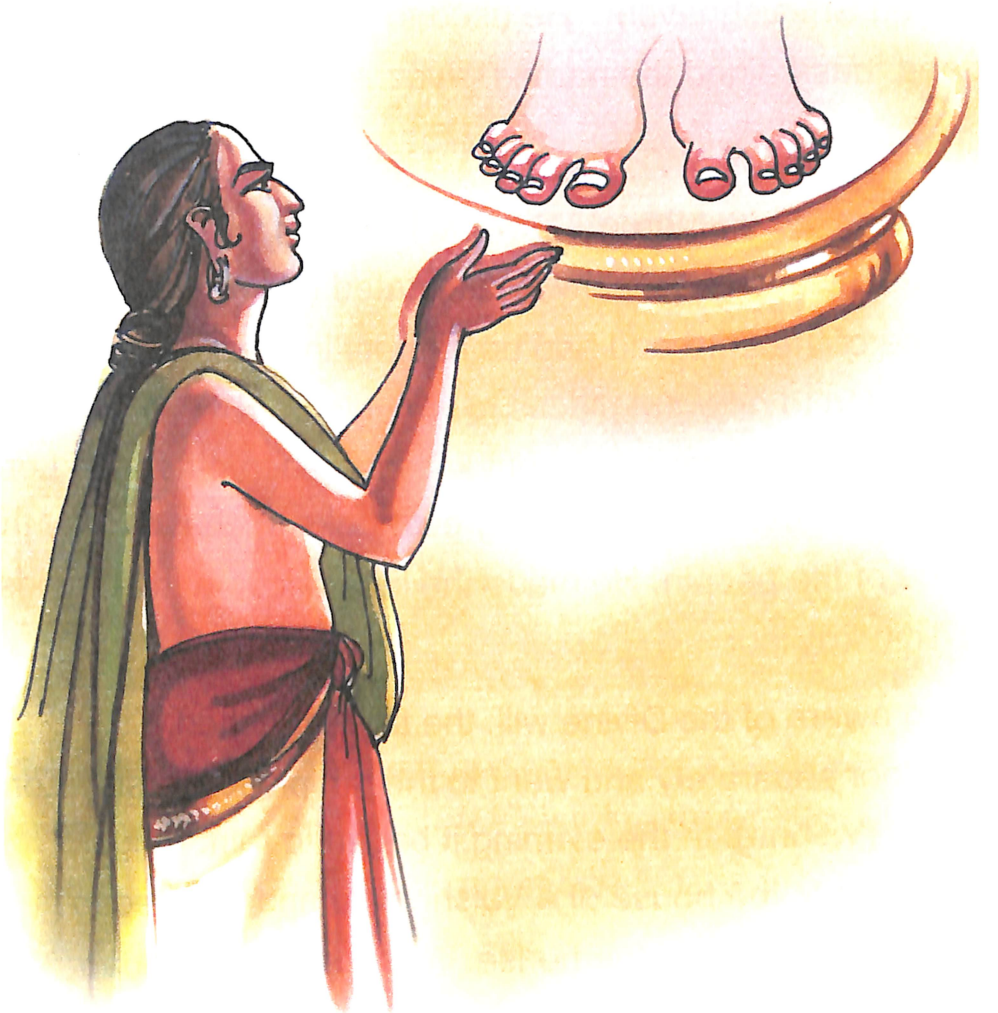
In that town was born, in a beautiful Kurukathi (Madhavi) flower in the year Siddharti, in the Tamil month Aippasi, with the birth star Avittam, on Navami Tithi (ninth day), as the incarnation of the Gowmataki (mace) of the Lord, Bhootattazhwar (middle of 7th century A.D.); he became an unparalleled devotee of Lord Vishnu. He was not interested in anything else other than immersing himself in the devotion of the Lord and sang many hymns in His praise. He was also much in love with the Tamil language. He lived long, winning the respect and admiration of all others.



Koviloor Digital Library

Peiyazhwar 3

Another important centre in Thodnainadu was Tirumailai, also known as Mylapore. Besides many other great scholars, the divine poet Tiruvalluvar, the author of Tirukkural, also belonged to this place. One of the important holy temples there was that of Adikesava Perumal. In the tank nearby a rare Sevvallippoo



(red lilly) bloomed; on this flower was born in the year Siddharthi (mid-7th century A.D.), in the Tamil month Aippasi on Dasami Tithi (10th day) Peiyazhwar; born on a Thursday his birth star was Sadayam. He was the incarnation of the Lord's sword Nandakam. He studied several texts in depth. With the grace of the Lord he was able to understand everything he studied thoroughly. His mind dwelt on the Lord all the time and he composed several hymns in His praise. Along with Lord Vishnu he worshipped His consort Sridevi too and thus propagated Srivaishnavam. He used to wander around like a ghost and thus gained the name Peiyazhwar (ghost).

First Three Azhwars

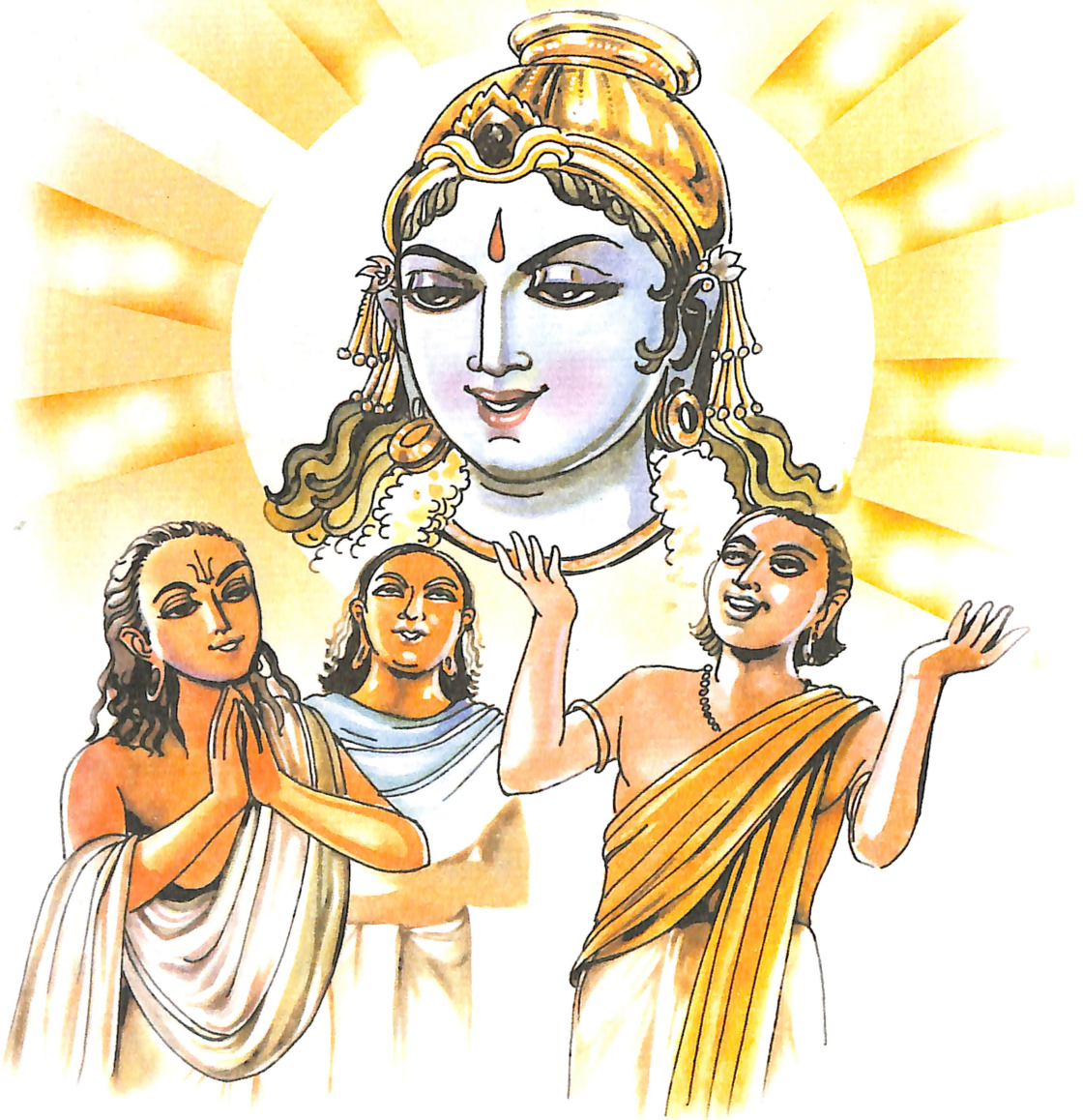
Acclaimed as the first three Azhwars, Poigai Azhwar, Bhoothattazhwar and Peiazhwar dedicated their entire life to the service of the Lord and had no interest in the worldly things. They travelled to different places to worship Lord Vishnu. As the three were moving around without knowing each other, the Lord decided to use them to compose great books to chase away the ignorance of the people. He made the idea occur in their minds to visit Thirukoviloor.

Not being aware of the Divine will, the three reached Thirukoviloor separately and went to the temple to worship Lord Trivikrama (Vishnu). In the evening it began to rain. Poigai Azhwar came to the house of a Vaishnavite and decided to sleep in the verandah of the house. To the same verandah

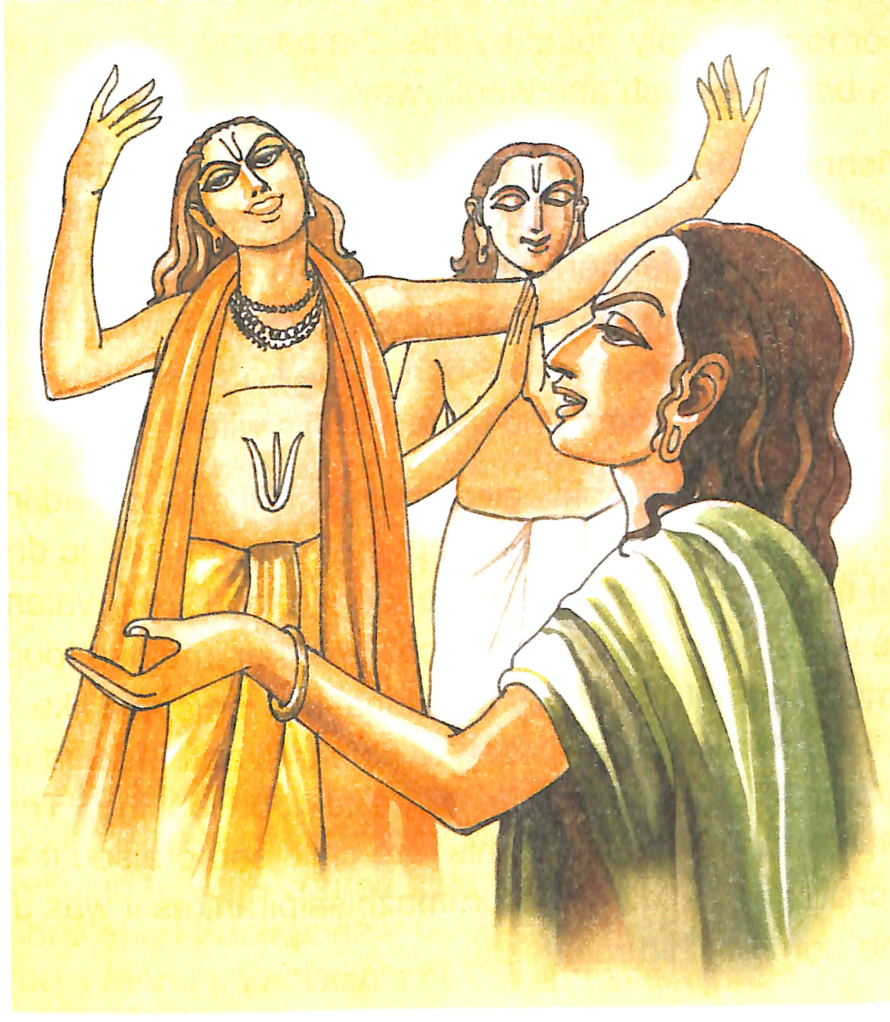
came also Bhoodathazhwar and asked the former if he could also get a little space there. Immediately Poigai Azhwar sat up and said, "only one person can lie down here, but two can sit; so you come and sit here". A little later Peiazhwar too came there and requested to join them in the shelter. Poigai Azhwar

said, “well, one can lie down and two can sit here; but three can only stand; so let us three stand here, come and join us”. The three stood there together and exchanged information about each other and began to discuss the greatness of the Lord.

The Lord of Thirukoviloor caused heavy rain to pour and came to stand along with them without their knowledge and made



them feel crushed. All the three of them began to wonder why they felt suddenly so close, who else could be there. With their god-given power they were able to realize the presence of the Lord among them and witnessed the vision of the great beauty of the Lord with their minds' eye. Peiazhwar began to sing in a happy delirium; the three of them each composed a hundred verses, which were known as first, second and third Antadis. Thus the Lord brought out the great poetry through his devotees.



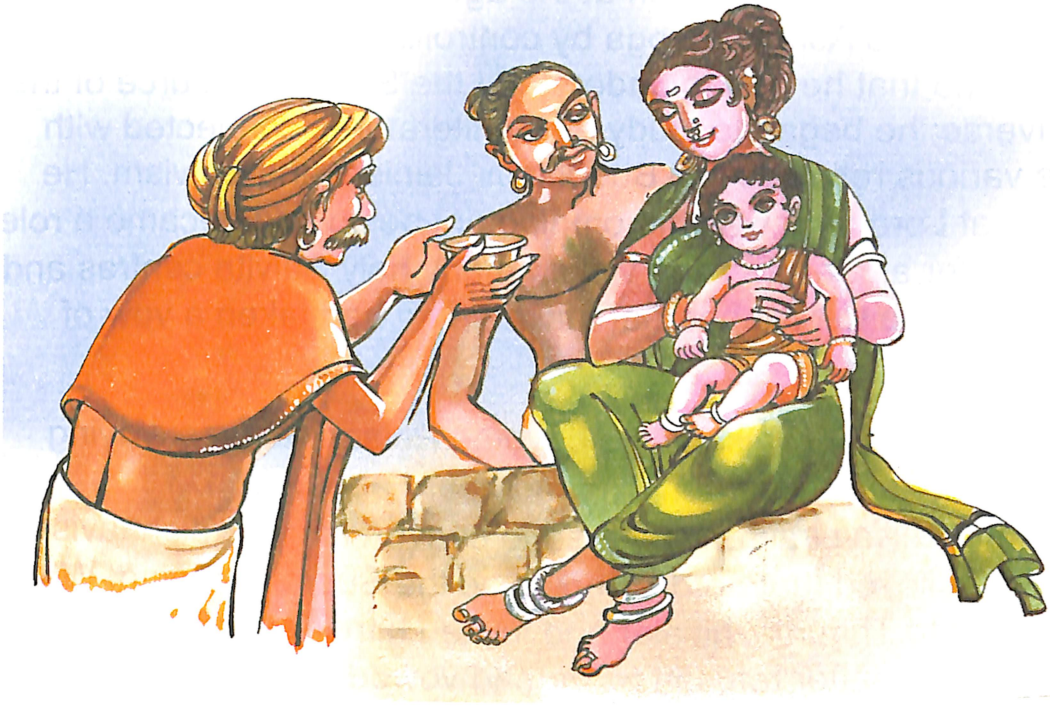
Koviloor Digital Library

Thirumazhisai Azhwar 4

In Thondainadu to the east of Kanchipuram is a holy center called Thirumazhisai. Many sages had come there with the advice of Lord Brahma to conduct their penance. Sage Bhargava conducted Dheergachatrayaga for Lord Vishnu. At that time his wife became pregnant and gave birth to a male child in the Tamil month of Thai (January-February) (mid 7th century A.D.). Born on the birth star Makam, the child had no hands or feet. Deeply upset by this, the parents left the baby under a bamboo bush and went away.

Lord Vishnu appeared there with His consort and rendered the baby with its limbs and disappeared. Thiruvalan, who worked with bamboos, came there to get bamboos and found the beautiful baby crying there. When he could not find the baby's parents, he considered it a boon from the Lord, as he had no children; he took it home and gave it to his wife Pangayarselvi.

Though not the baby's biological mother, still milk welled in her breasts out of love for the child, but the baby refused to drink it. Even at that tender age it had abandoned food. Thiruvalan and his wife were distressed that the child neither imbibed food nor performed any natural bodily functions, but remained like a statue. But they were surprised to note that at the same time the child grew up to appear healthy and good looking. The local people came to look at this rare child and praised it as a divine child and called him Thirumazhisaipiran, as it was a boon from the Lord of Thirumazhisai.



At that time there was an old man, a great devotee of Lord Vishnu. Though born in a lower caste, he was a great scholar. He was very sad at not having any children. When he heard about the wonder child, who did not take any food, he boiled cow's milk well and took it in a cup and went along with his wife to the child and begged it to drink. The boy too happily drank the milk. Pangayarselvi was astonished at this and realized that the old man must be someone great and requested that he should come with the milk everyday. He was only too happy to oblige.

One particular day it left a little milk in the cup and indicated to the old couple with its glance that if they drank it they would get a baby of their own. When they drank it, they felt young and energetic and in due course a boy was born to them, whom they christened Kanikannan; he was well educated and later became a friend and disciple of Thirumazhisaipiran.

As the son of a sage, even at the age of seven Thirumazhisai wanted to do Ashtangayoga by controlling all the five senses. But to do that he had to understand the Supreme source of the universe; he began to study all the literatures connected with the various religions like Buddhism, Jainism and Saivism. He felt that Lord Siva was the omnipotent being and became a role model for all Saivites and visited many holy Saivite centres and finally came to Mylapore; at that time he had taken a vow of silence.

During that time Vaishnavite devotee Peiazhwar was staying there in a nearby garden. He had heard about Thirumazhisaipiran and wanted to convert him to Vaishnavism, as he believed that Lord Vishnu was the Supreme Being. When he went to Thirumazhisaiar and invited him for a religious debate, the latter refused as he had vowed not to speak. So Peiazhwar decided to conduct a trick. He brought several plants and planted them upside down with the roots above the ground and tried to water them with a pot with several holes in it and tied with a frayed rope. Thirumazhisaiar laughed at this and called him a fool. But Peiazhwar challenged him that he was not able to see the meaning behind what he did.

Peiazhwar explained that the frayed rope, pot with holes and the plants kept upside down symbolized Thirumazhisaiar's unsteady mind, as he had been born in one religion, but moved on to worship some other god. This led to a debate between the two as to who was the most powerful God. When finally Peiazhwar explained how he had realized Lord Narayana (Vishnu) within himself, Thirumazhisai understood that Narayana was the Supreme Lord and requested the other to show him the path to realize the Lord. He was taught the Thirumandiram (Ohm Namo Narayana), which he continued to chant and was able to get the vision of the Lord.

Thirumazhisaiyar then became a Vaishnavite and composed several verses in Tamil. He reached Tiruvallikeni and sat in deep meditation. To test his devotion Lord Siva went along with His consort on his Rishabha (Bull). Goddess Devi wanted to bless Thirumazhisaiar and they both went near him and asked what boon he wanted. Though initially he ignored Lord Siva and Goddess Parvathi, on their insistence, he asked in a teasing manner for boons which were in the departments of Vishnu and others. Siva got enraged at his attitude and opened His third eye; though the fire from the third eye burnt the entire universe, it could not hurt the Azhwar. All the gods went to Lord Vishnu and prayed to Him to save the world.

Lord Narayana caused a great rain to quench the fire; the rain went to flood everywhere, but the Azhwar could not be disturbed from his meditation. Observing his great devotion, Lord Siva gave him the title of Bhaktisarar.

Koviloor Digital Library

Thirumazhisaiar was once sitting in meditation. A magician named Suddhikaran, was moving along the sky seated on a tiger. The tiger hesitated without moving when they neared the place where the Azhwar was sitting. Wondering what was going on, the magician looked around and then realized that the tiger did not move due to the power of the Azhwar. He came down and when he saw the worn out clothing, he offered a silk robe, which he produced through his magic. But the Azhwar refused to accept it and produced through his own meditative power a robe gleaming like a jewel. Siddhikaran took off his gem set chain and offered it to the Azhwar; again the Yogi refused it and changed the Tulasi beads in his hand into a most beautiful set of gems. The magician felt ashamed and understood the greatness of Thirumazhisaiar; he accepted the string of gems and left.

Once again the Azhwar sat in meditation. Having heard about his greatness an alchemist named Konkanachithan came to

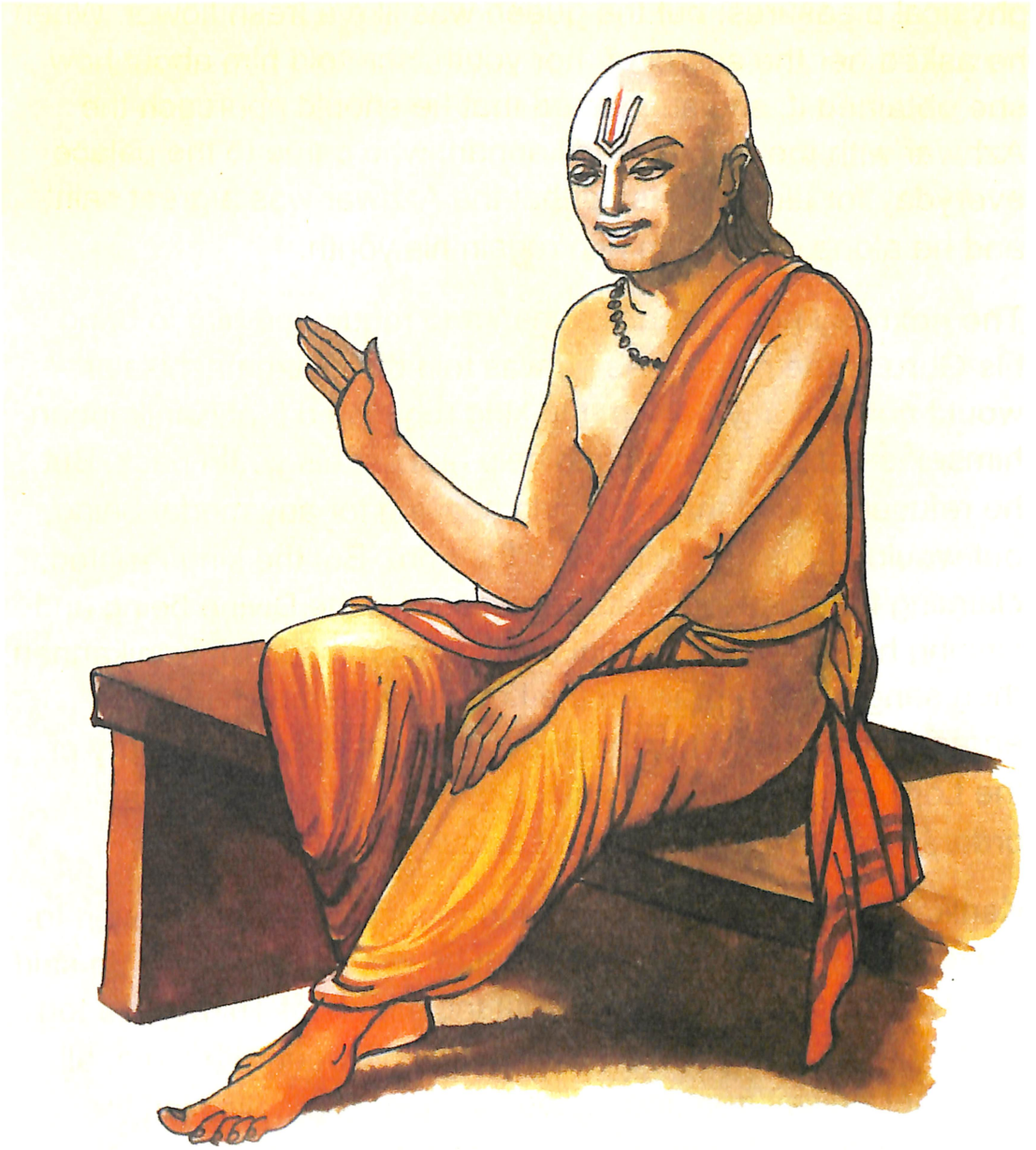
him and offered a pill, which could convert even iron into gold. Immediately the Azhwar gathered the dust from his body and the wax from his ears and rolled it and gave it to the alchemist saying that it would convert even granite into gold. When the alchemist tested it with the stone lying there, it turned into gold!

Then Thirumazhisapiran reached a mountain cave and sat in meditation. The first three Azhwars, namely Poigai Azhwar, Bhoothathazhwar and Peiazhwar were on a pilgrimage of Vishnu temples, composing verses in His praise. When they reached the village near the mountain cave, a bright light attracted them; with wonder they followed it and realized that Thirumazhisaiar was in the cave. All the four were lost in the devotion of the Lord and sat in meditation of Him. After some time they came to Mylapore and worshipped near the Kairava Theertham where Peiazhwar was born. Then the first three Azhwars took their leave and Thirumazhisaiar went to his birth place.

Having reached there, he dug in one place to find Thirumann (holy sand which Vaishnavites use for drawing their religious symbol on their foreheads and bodies). He was upset when he could not find the right kind and fell into a deep slumber with exhaustion. In his dream the Lord appeared and indicated the place where he could find it.

Later he went to Thiruvekka near Kanchipuram where Poigai Azhwar was born. He felt like staying there and meditating. When he was there, Kanikannan, who was born to the old couple, who had drunk the milk left behind by him when he was a child, came to him and became his disciple. An old woman, hearing of his greatness, used to clean and decorate the place

where he was staying. One morning when he woke up, he saw this woman; pleased at her service he offered to fulfill any desire that she might have. She wanted to be rid of her old age from which she was suffering. The moment he set his compassionate glance on her, she turned into a beautiful young woman. Feeling enamoured by her own beauty, she paid her obeisance to him and went home.



One day when she was standing on the balcony of her house, the Pallava king, who was going on a procession saw her and fell in love with her. He met her and expressed his desire to marry her. They married and were living happily. But after a while, as the king was a little old he could not indulge much in

physical pleasures; but the queen was like a fresh flower. When he asked her the secret of her youth, she told him about how she obtained it; she suggested that he should approach the Azhwar with the help of Kanikannan, who came to the palace everyday for alms; she said that the Azhwar was a great saint and he alone could help him regain his youth.

The next day he met Kanikannan and requested him to bring his Guru to the palace. As he was told that Thirumazhisaiar would not visit any palace, the king requested that Kanikannan himself should sing a song to help him get his youth back. But he refused saying that he would not sing for any mortal being, but would only sing the glory of the Lord. But the king insisted, claiming that the king is also an aspect of the Divine being and singing his praise was equal to singing on the Lord. Kanikannan then sang a verse praising the Lord at the temple, which enraged the king. When he explained that singing the glory of the Lord was also equal to singing that of the king, he was ordered to leave the town right away.

Kanikannan came to his Guru and requested his permission to leave, when the latter told him that he would also leave. He said that he would bring the Lord from the temple of Thiruvekka too with them. As the Lord left the temple and went with them, all the other deities from the various temples there also left the town at night and even the sun abandoned the town and it was a lasting darkness in the kingdom, leading to the suffering of all living beings there. Realising it was all due to the Lord leaving the temple, the king became aware of his mistake.

The king, along with his ministers, reached the garden where they were all staying and begged the pardon of Kanikannan and

requested him to return to the city. At that Thirumazhisaiar also decided to return and requested the Lord to go back to His temple. The Lord too complied with the wish of His devotee.

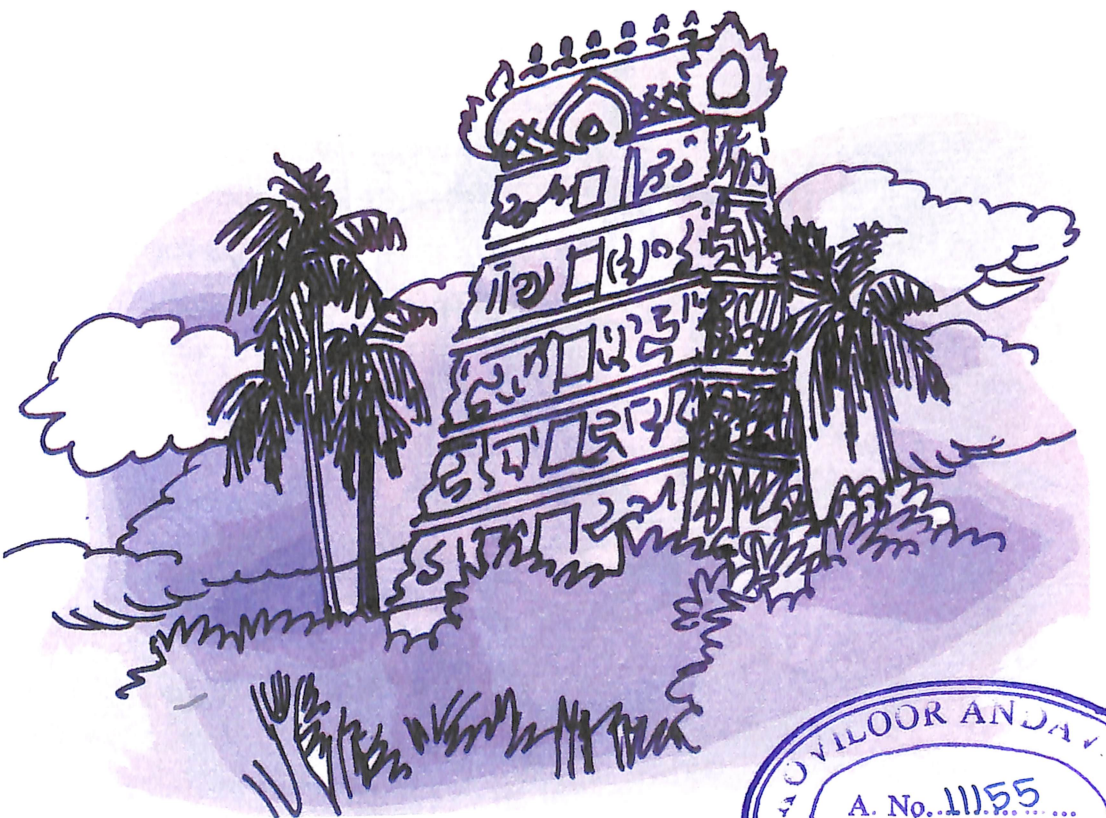
At a later time the Azhwar decided to go to Kumbakonam. On the way he and Knaikannan decided to take rest at Perumbuliyur and went and sat at the verandah of a brahmin's house. Some Brahmins were chanting the Vedas at that time and when they saw the Azhwar decided that they should not do so in the hearing of a person from a lower caste. Realising what was happening Thirumazhisaiar got off the seat and at that moment the scholars forgot what they were chanting. Understanding their problem the Azhwar indicated the sentence they had to start from. When they understood his greatness they begged the Azhwar's pardon. The latter explained the omnipresence of the Lord to them and went away.

In order to get alms he went through several streets of the village and the statue of the Lord at the temple turned its face towards him wherever he went. The priest was surprised at this and informed some scholars, who could not understand the phenomenon either and reported the wonder to Perumbuliyur Adigal, the chief of a sacrifice, which was being conducted. He understood what was happening through his mind's eye and went to pay his obeisance to the Azhwar. He was taken to the sacrifice hall and was honoured with the initial ritual, which was disliked by some of the religious scholars, who thought it was incorrect to honour someone from the lower caste.

At this Thirumazhisaiar decided to teach them all a lesson and when he prayed to the Lord to help him, the Lord offered His vision at the milky ocean accompanied by the goddesses

Koviloor Digital Library

Sridevi and Bhoodevi on the body of the Azhwar. Everyone realized his status and requested him to pardon them. He took leave of them and proceeded to Kumbakonam.He went to the Vishnu temple and worshipped there, after which he went to the river Cauvery and dropped all the palm leaves with the verses he composed written on them. Of them 'Thiruchandaviruttam' with 120 poems and 'Nanmukan Thiruvandai' with ninety poems swam against the current and returned to him. He took them to the temple and prayed to the Lord to get up and come and talk to him. The Lord obliged His devotee and since then He has been in a standing position at the temple. The Azhawar continued to live there at Kumbakonam for many years till he died at a very old age.



KOVILOOR ANDAVAN
A. No. 11155
Q22
LIBRARY, KOVILOOR

Koviloor Digital Library

Nammazhwar 5

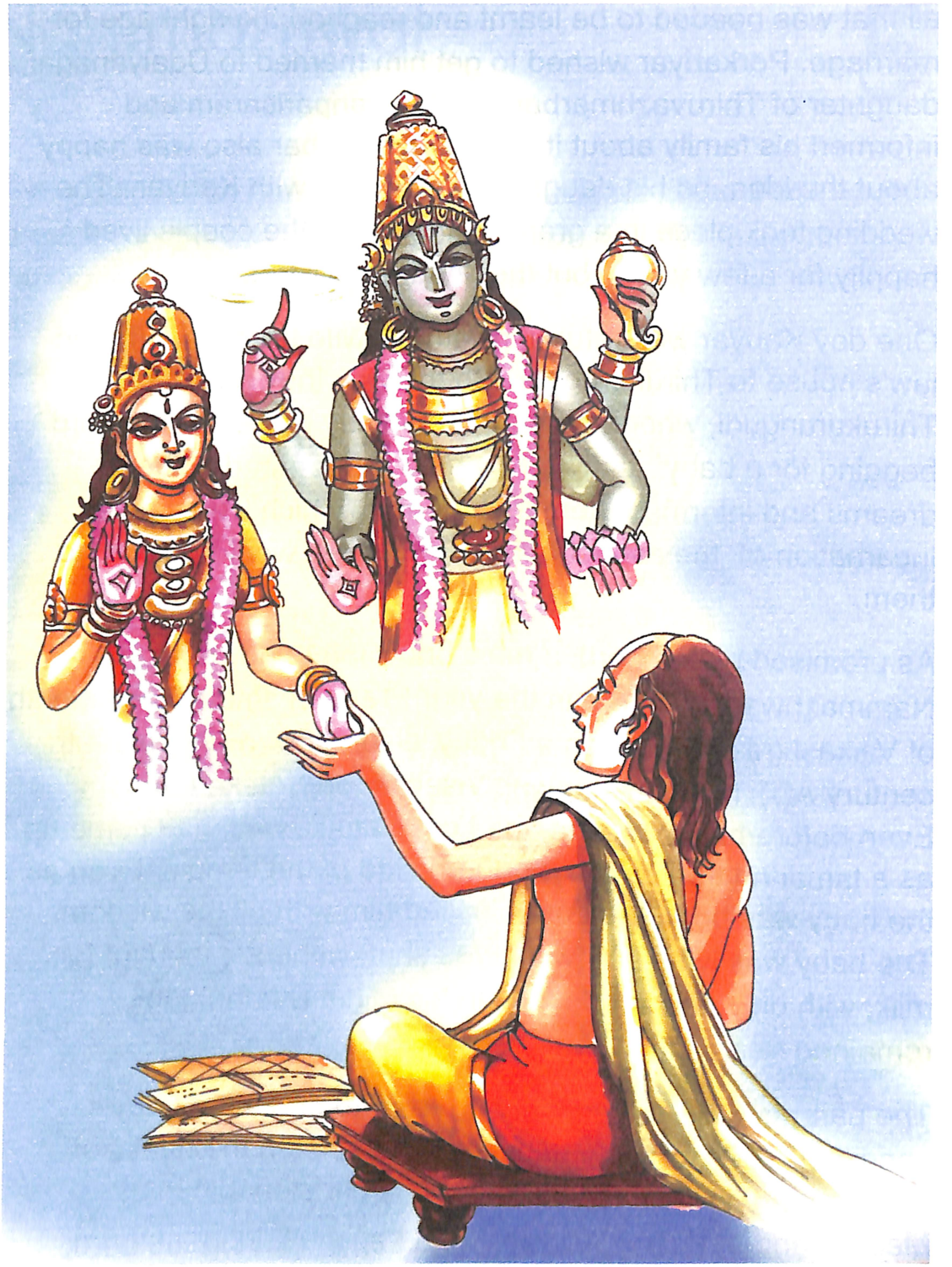
There was a holy centre called Thirukurugoor in the Pandya kingdom on the banks of river Tamrabarani. There was a traditional farmers clan with the rights to rule over that place. They were great devotees of Lord Vishnu; Porkariyar was a descendant of that clan, to whom was born Kariyar; he studied

all that was needed to be learnt and reached the right age for marriage. Porkariyar wished to get him married to Udaiyanagai, daughter of Thiruvazhmarbar of Thiruvanparisaram and informed his family about it. Thiruvazhmarbar also was happy about the idea, as his daughter was in love with Kariyar. The wedding took place in a grand manner and the couple lived happily for a few years, but they had no children.

One day Kariyar was returning with his wife from his father-in-law's house to Thirukurugoor. On the way they reached Thirukurungudi, where, in the temple, they prayed to the Lord begging for a baby; that night the Lord appeared in their dreams and informed them that a baby , which would be an incarnation of the aspect of His army chief, would be born to them.

As promised by the Lord, a male baby, later known as Nammazhwar, was born in the year Pramadi, in the Tamil month of Vaikasi (May-June), on a Friday, also a new moon day (9th century AD); his birth star was Visakam on Kataka Lagnam. Even before him Adisesha, the Lord's snake bed, had come up as a tamarind tree on the northern side of the temple. Even as the baby was born, the Lord blessed him with all the wisdom. The baby was lying still, with eyes shut, without a thought for milk, with only the Lord's face in his mind. But the baby remained fresh as a flower.

The parents were very upset and worried about the baby's condition. They took the baby to the temple on the banks of Porunai and prayed to the Lord. They christened him as Maaran and put him in a cradle and kept imploring the Lord, Who in turn bid his army chief to go to the earth and teach all



that was true to the baby. As ordered the army chief came and taught the baby without anyone else's knowledge. The baby understood everything and crawled to the tamarind tree and there sat with closed eyes, in total silence for sixteen years in deep meditation, without food and drink.

It is generally believed that when a child is conceived, a gas known as Sadam reaches the foetus to link it to earthly bondage; but even while in his mother's womb, this baby had chased away Sadam and was thus known as Sadagopar. He had no interest in anything worldly and was lost in the meditation of Lord Vishnu.

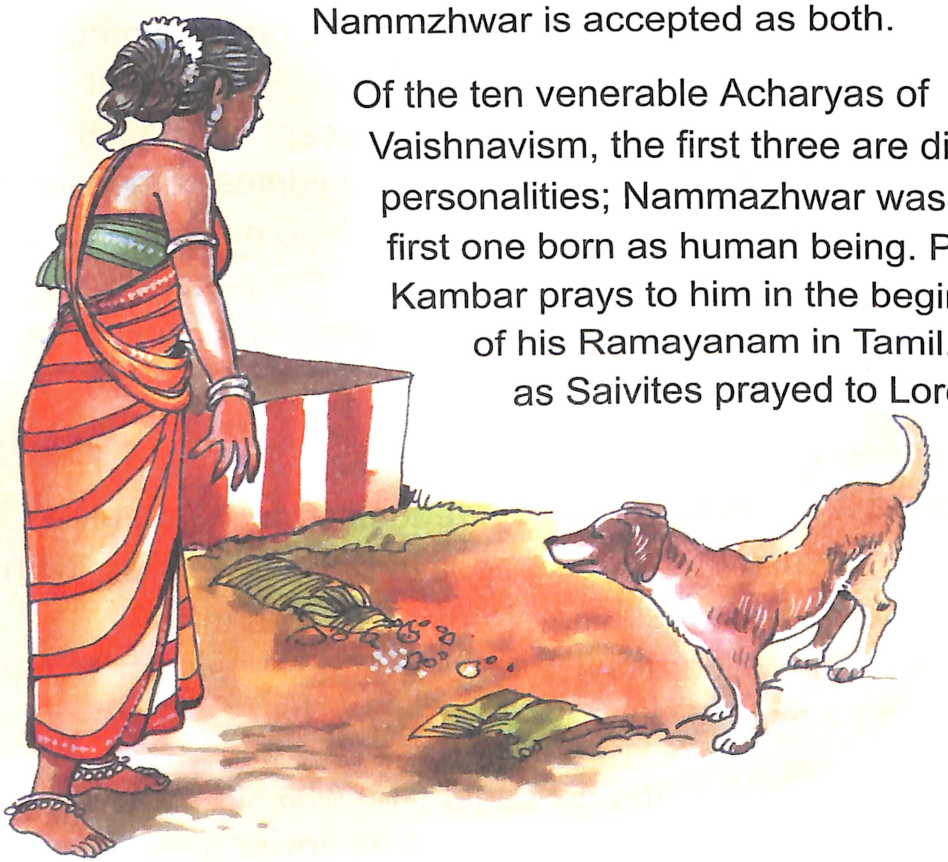
At that time Madurakavi Azhwar had been born in Thirukoloor in a Brahmin family. A scholar inTamil and Sanskrit, he was also a great devotee of Lord Vishnu; he had gone on a pilrimage to the seven holy centres of the Lord and had finally stayed at Ayodhya. He requested Sadagopar to accept him as his disciple. He was asked to write down the verses composed by Sadagopar. He composed a verse imagining himself as a girl in love with Lord Ranganatha of Srirangam. Pleased with his devotee's poetry, the Lord appeared in front of him with His consort with all the paraphernalia.

Lost in deep devotion and love for the Lord, Sadagopar composed a series of verses. As requested by Madurakavi, he sang the essence of the four Vedas in Tamil and called them Thiruviruttam, Thiruvasiriyam, Periyathiruvandadi and Thiruvaimozhi. Madurakavi and several others were benefited by learning them.

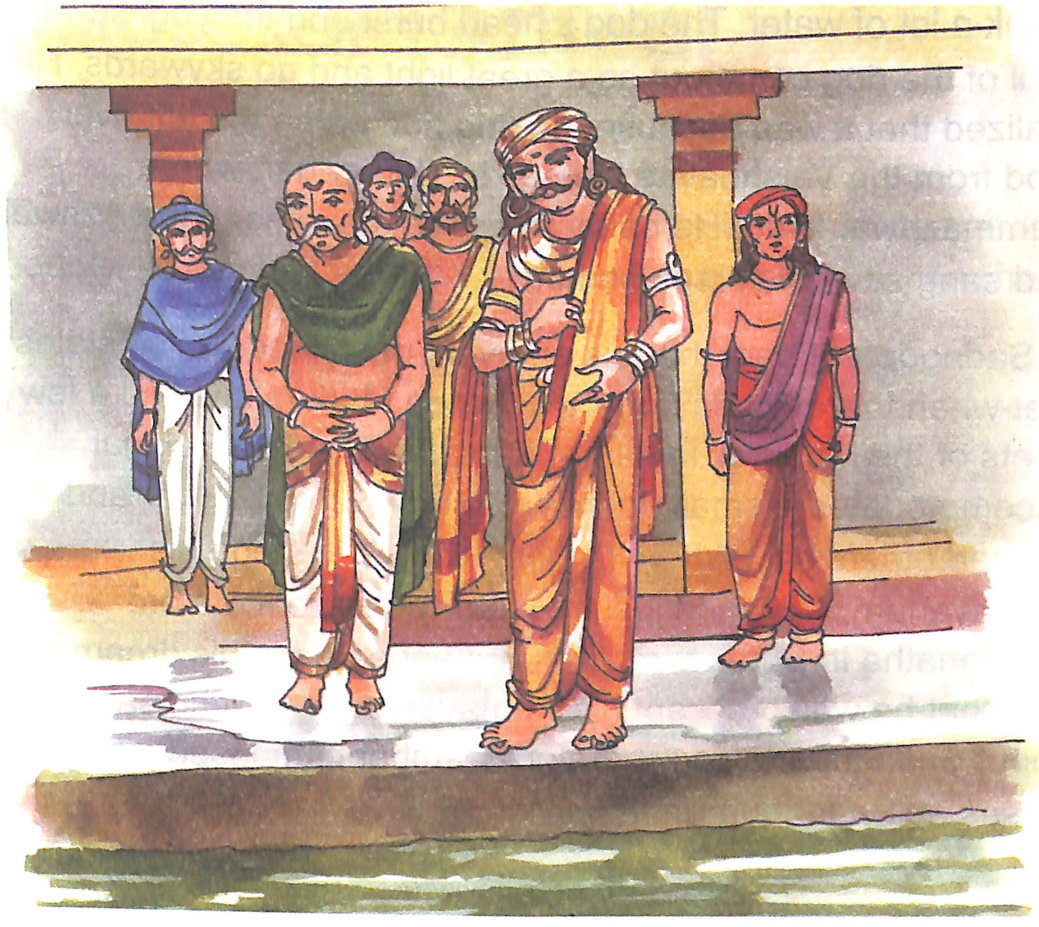
Combining his name and his father's he was known as Karimaaran. Since he wore the Mahizha flower garland, worn

on the Lord's image, he was also known as Vagulabharanan. Another name he had was Parankusar. Since the Lord Himself had addressed him as Nammazhwar, he was known by that name to everyone.

When he was seated under the tamarind tree, several devotees from the 108 holy centres of Lord Vishnu came to see him. He was seated there for thirtyone years, all the time immersed in the glory of the Lord, composing several songs for the benefit of all the devotees. Finally he abandoned his mortal form and attained the Lord's feet. As he established the principles of Vaishnavism, he is venerated as Kulapathi. He has been worshipped in the temples of Lord Vishnu. Vishnavite scholars are divided into two categories as Azhwars and Acharyas; but Nammzhwar is accepted as both.



Of the ten venerable Acharyas of Vaishnavism, the first three are divine personalities; Nammazhwar was the first one born as human being. Poet Kambar prays to him in the beginning of his Ramayanam in Tamil. Just as Saivites prayed to Lord

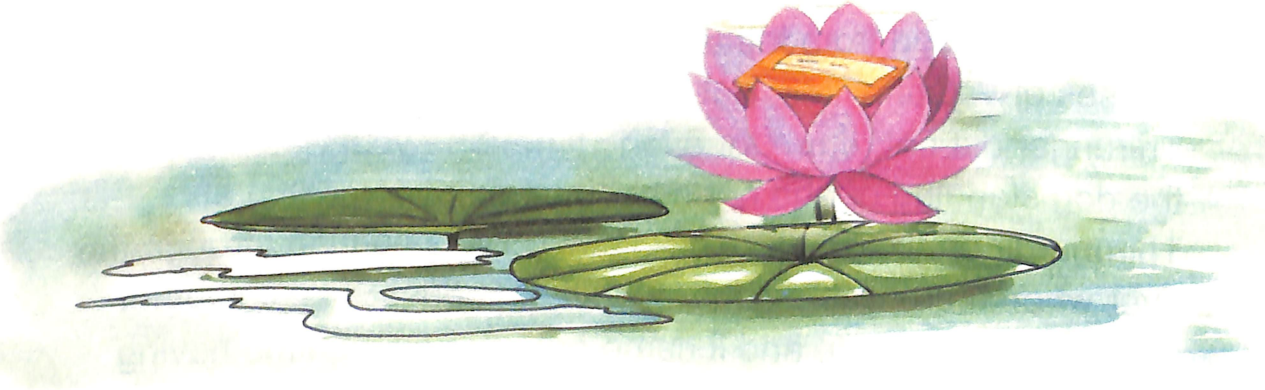


Vinayaka when they began to write a book, Vaishnavites began to pray to Nammazhwar. His birth place was also known as Thirunagar; there is a story in praise of its greatness.

There was a yogi on the northern bank of river Tamrabarni; he was bringing up a dog lovingly, which used to go around eating the left over food from the leaves thrown away outside the houses of Vaishnavites. But one day the dog, which went to Thirungar did not return for a long time. The yogi was awaiting the dog standing on the north bank of the river looking at Thirunagar on the south bank. The dog was coming through the river when there was a sudden rush of floods. But it could not swim against the tide and it came out after a long time having

drunk a lot of water. The dog's head burst and the yogi saw the soul of the dog come out as a great light and go skywards. He realized that it was because the dog had eaten the left over food from the Vaishnavite houses in Thirunagar, where Nammazhwar lived. He became a great devotee of the Azhwar and sang several verses on him.

In Sadagoparandadi there is an event described, which states that when there was a debate between Madurakavi and a few poets of the Madurai Tamil Sangam, the Sangam Palagai accommodated a small poem written by Nammazhwar and pushed others off. When Kambar wanted to stage his Ramayanam, written in just fifteen days, in front of Lord Ranganatha in Srirangam, the Lord appeared in his dream and said that he would accept his Ramayanam, only if he sang about Sadagopar also. Therefore Kambar composed a hundred verses as Sadagoparandadi.

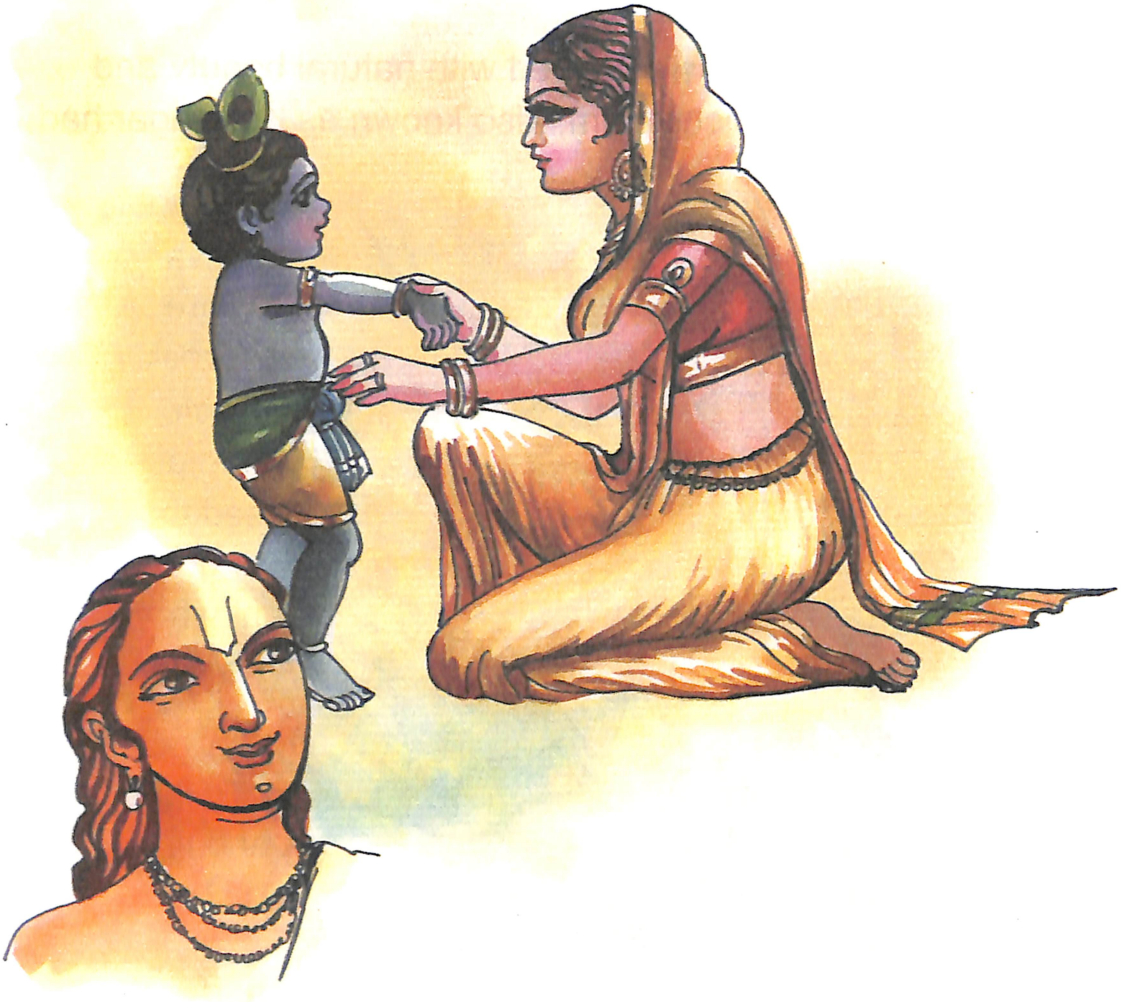


Koviloor Digital Library

Kulasekara Azhwar 6

The Chera kingdom was endowed with natural beauty and bounty. Its capital Vanchikalam, also known as Kollinagar had

Koviloor Digital Library



magnificent buildings. The land was known for chaste women and wise scholars. King Didaviragan, hailing from the Chera dynasty, was well read and ruled without waiving from the law and was also a great devotee of Lord Vishnu; he was also known for his charity and valour.

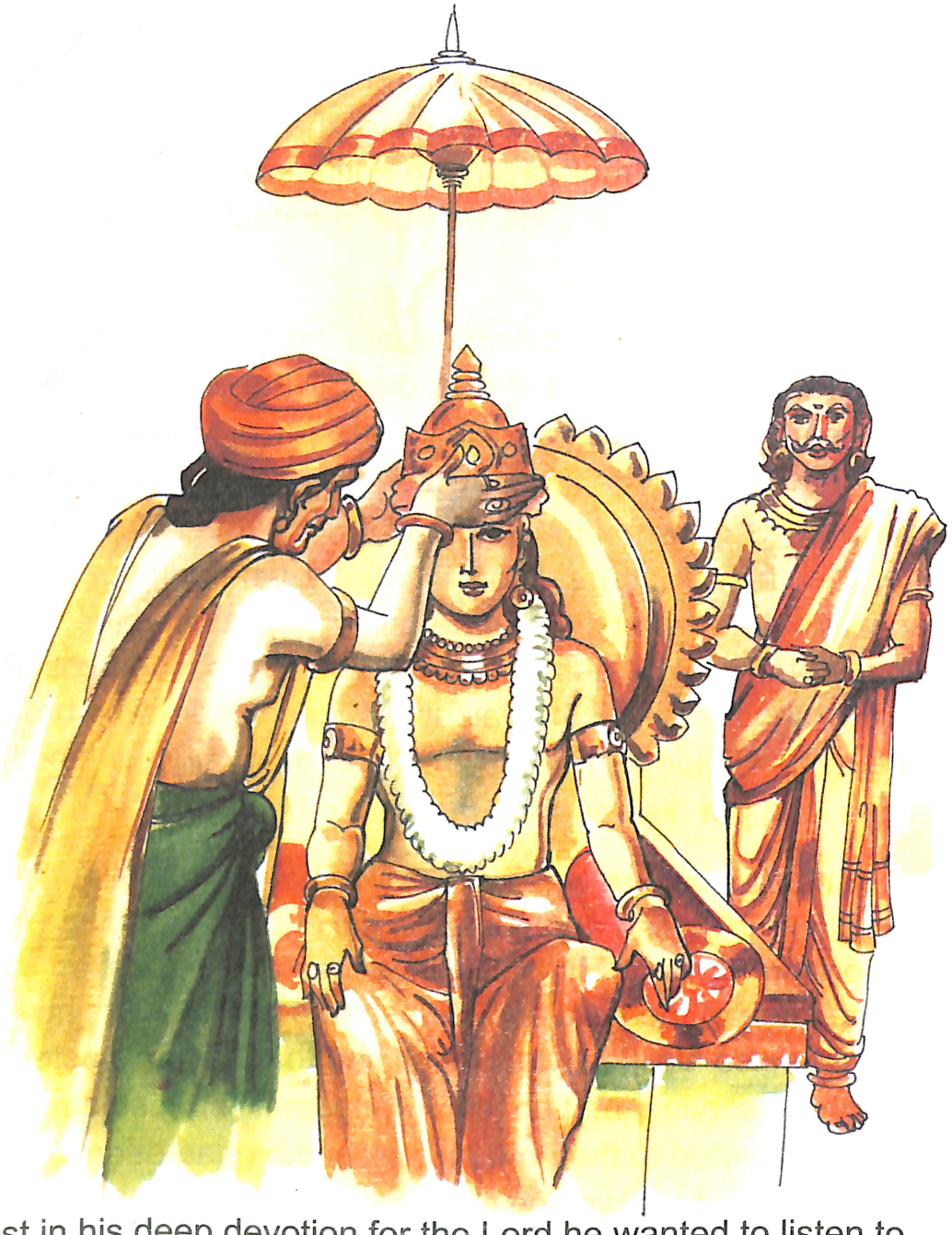
King Didaviragan was blessed with a handsome male baby in (latter part of 8th century AD) the year Parabhava during the

Tamil month of Masi (February-March) on the twelfth day after the new moon day, a Friday, with the star Punarpoosam; he was the incarnation of the Kaustuba of the Lord. There was great celebration on that day in the entire kingdom. The baby was named Kulasekaran. He was the greatest happiness for the royal parents.

At the age of five his education began; he became well versed in both Tamil and Sanskrit and studied all the necessary texts in them; he also attained expertise in all kinds of warfare. At the right age he was made the crown prince. After the death of his father he was crowned the king and turned out to be even better than his father in ruling his country, where the people lived without any worry. His fame and valour roused the jealousy of the rulers of the Pandya and Chola kingdoms. But they were no match for the valour of Kulasekaran, who brought all the three kingdoms under his rule. In admiration of him the Pandya king got his daughter married to him.

While king Kulasekara was fond of wars and family life, the Lord got into his mind and wiped off his egoism and made his attention turn towards Himself. Since then the king became a great devotee of the Lord and felt ashamed of the wars he had fought and also his life style. He felt sad that he had wasted his time without serving the Lord of Srirangam. He became more and more devoted to the Lord and wished he had been a stork or fish in the Koneru tank on the Tirupathi hills near the temple of Lord Venkateswatra (Vishnu). He used to imagine himself as Devaki, the mother of Krishna, and sing verses on the Divine baby; he even thought of himself as the lover of the Lord and composed poetry. He used to serve the devotees of the Lord with great love.

Koviloor Digital Library



Lost in his deep devotion for the Lord he wanted to listen to Ramayana, the story of the Lord in his incarnation as Rama; he invited a Vaishnavite scholar to narrate the story; while the scene of the war between Rama and Ravana was being described, he became so involved in the story and wanted to

help Rama and ordered his army to get ready. Quiet perplexed about this order, the army was got ready and the chariot of the king was brought. Realising the king's mental state, the ministers asked the Vaishnavite scholar what to do next. Immediately he went and bowed to the king and told him that Rama had single handedly won the war and had been united with his wife Seetha and had become the ruler of Ayodhya.

This conclusion of the Ramayana relieved his anguish and he thanked the scholar and ordered the army to disperse. The ministers felt that the king's devotion has become so intense due to the association of the Vaishnavites and decided to change the situation. They removed a necklace of precious

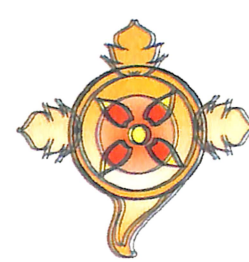
Koviloor Digital Library

gems from the jewellery box used by the king for his worship and hid it. Next day the king was shocked to find the necklace missing and informed the ministers. They told him that only Vaishnavites were allowed to enter that room and one of them alone could have stolen it.

The king refused to accept that and said that the devotees of Vishnu were not attracted by worldly riches or women and he could prove it. He told them to put a cobra in a pot and bring it. Though scared of the snake, they did as ordered. He put his hand into the pot and said if the Lord's devotees had stolen the necklace the snake would bite him; the cobra remained coiled

at the bottom of the pot; then it came out and bowed to him. The king ordered that the snake be taken out and allowed to go unharmed. The ministers confessed their deed and begged his pardon.

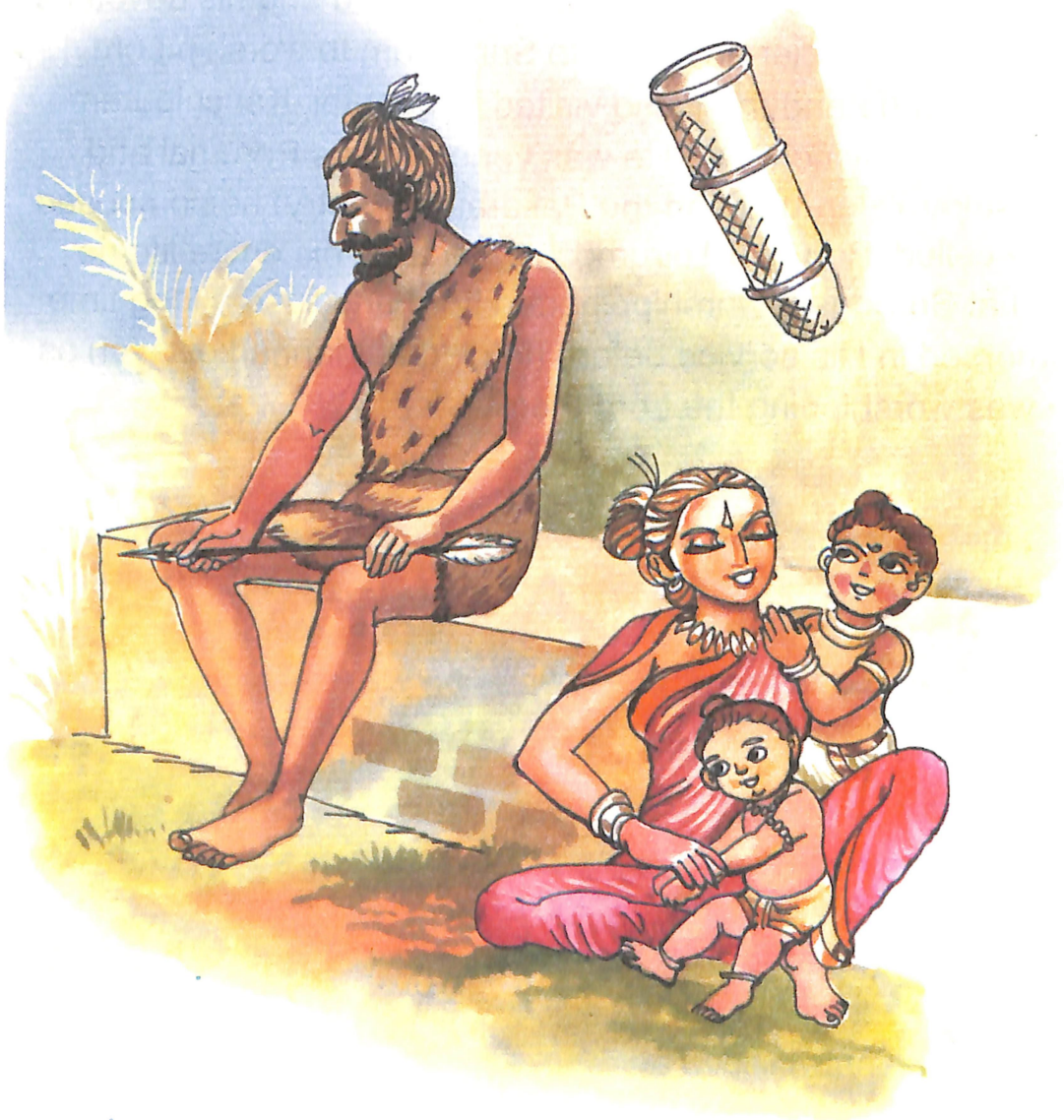
The king pardoned their action taken out of ignorance; he told them to relinquish worldly pleasures and immerse themselves in the service of the Lord. He decided to crown his son as the king and devote himself to the service of the Lord and his devotees. He went with other devotees to Srirangam to worship Lord Ranaganatha and then also visited Thirupathi, Kanchipuram and other holy centres. He was venerated as Perumal and Kulasekara Perumal and the Pasurams (poetry) he composed were called 'Perumal Thirumozhi'. Through his entire life he lived at Srirangam worshipping the Lord and lived a long time immersed in His service before he died at Mannarkoil even as he was worshipping the Lord there.



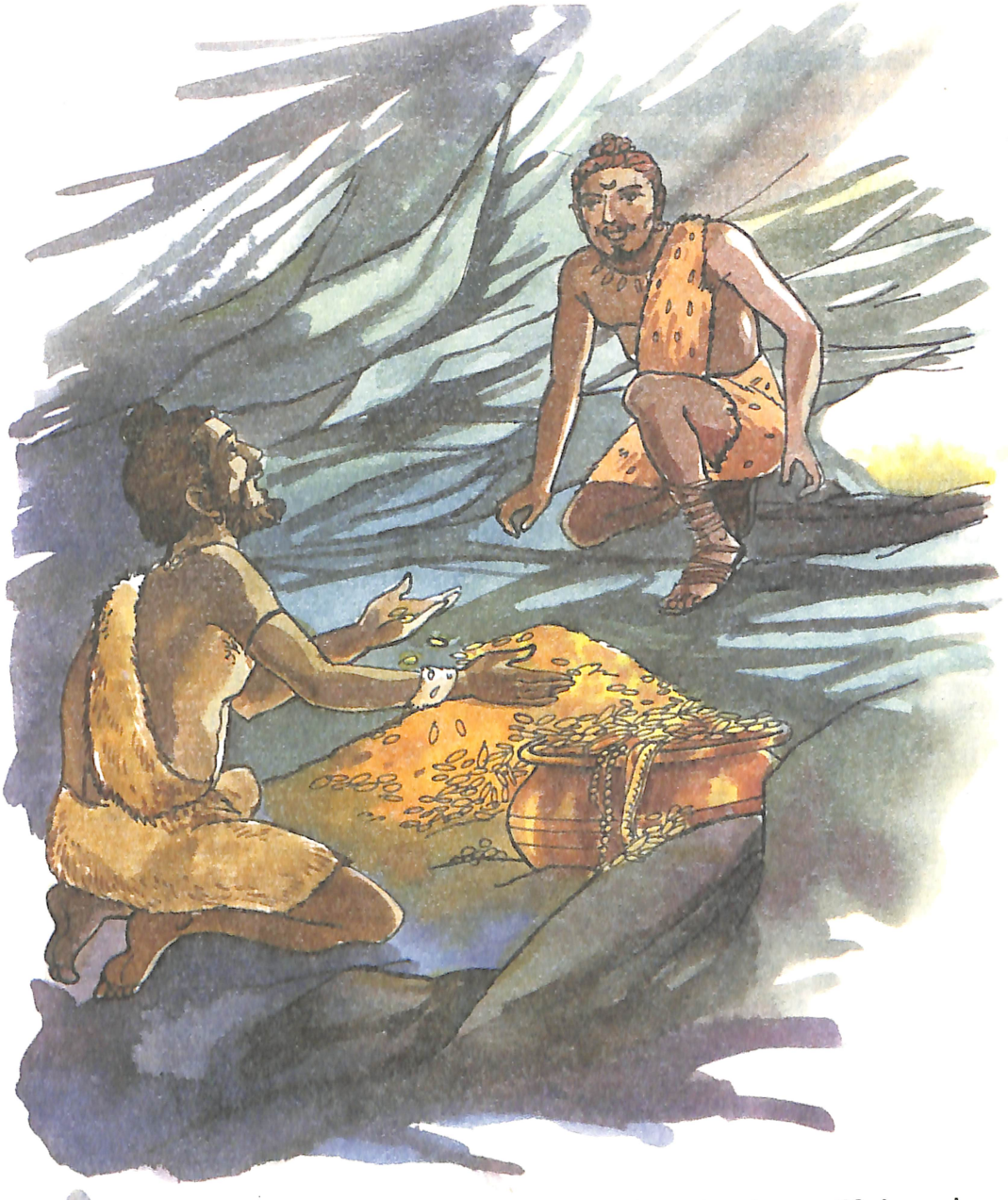
Koviloor Digital Library

Periazhwar 7

Once upon a time the Pandya kingdom was rich with pearls and Tamil language and was the home to great poets; the kings were known for their just rule; the rivers Vaigai and Porunai made it fertile. In that kingdom was a place called Putthur, part of which was dense forest, with wild animals roaming freely.



Koviloor Digital Library



Several hunters lived there, whose chief had a beautiful and chaste wife called Malli; she brought up with love her two sons Villi and Kandan, who at the proper age went hunting. The younger Kandan went chasing a tiger, who finally pounced on him and killed him. Finding his brother dead, Villi was filled with a deep sadness and fainted.

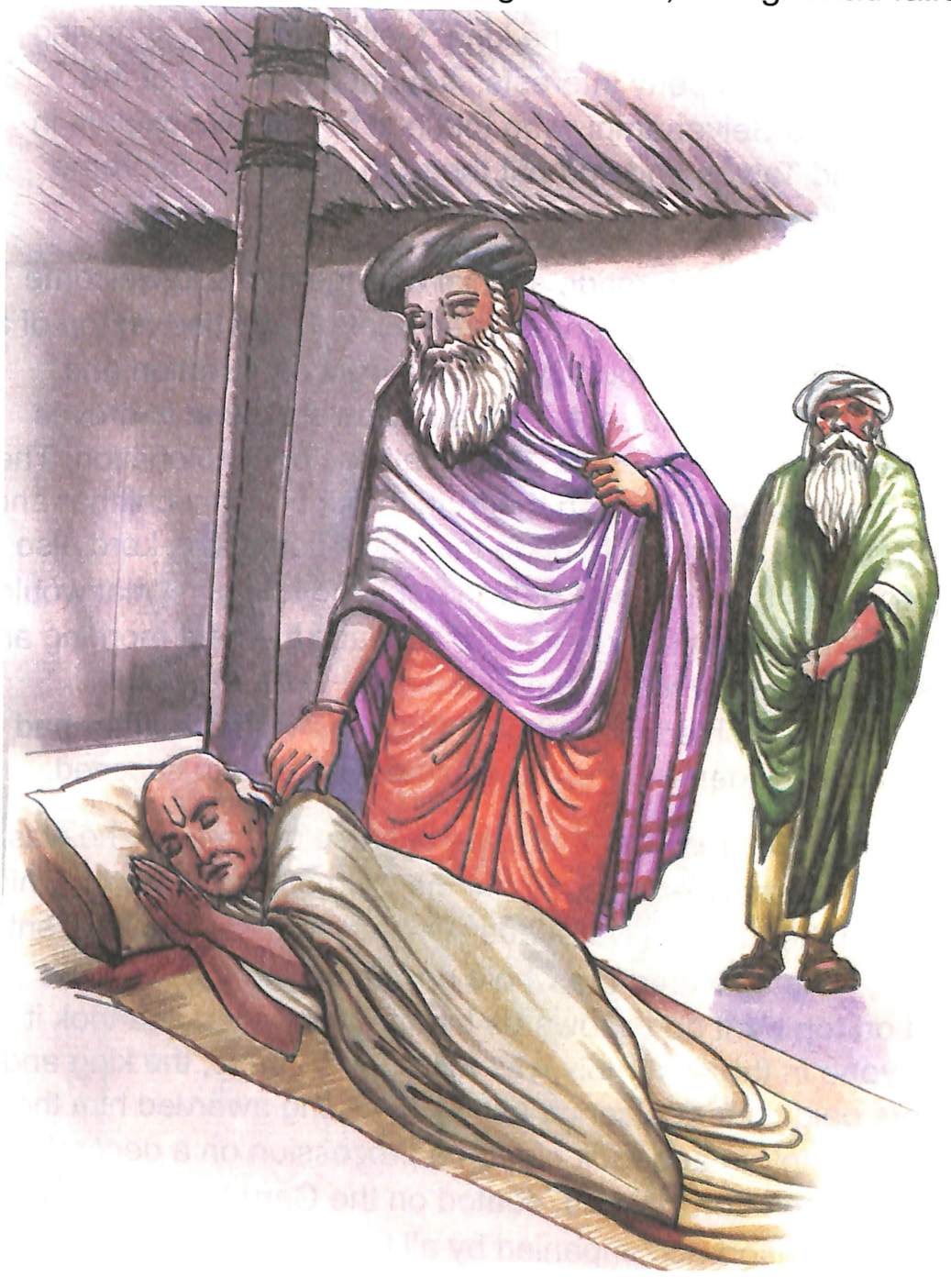
Koviloor Digital Library
The compassionate Lord Vishnu appeared in his dream and said that He and His consort were under a banyan tree nearby and that Villi should build a temple there and make the people of Putthur to come and live there. But Villi replied that he could not do it without his brother's help and also he had no wealth to build a temple. The Lord made his brother come alive and bade them go to a nearby cave and find sufficient wealth for the work.

The brothers built the temple and a beautiful town around it, where the people of Putthur came to live. The town was named Villiputthur and the country around it Mallinadu after their mother. Among the Brahmins, who came there, was a group known as Valiars, who tied their hair above their forehead. There was a scholar among them called Mukunda Bhattar, who hailed from a family of traditional devotees of Vishnu. His wife was Padmavalli. To them was born a male baby in the year Kurodana (latter part of 8th century AD) during the Tamil month of Aani (June-July) on the eleventh day after the new moon day with the birth star Swathi. He was later revered as Vishnuchitthar and Periaazhwar.

Though even as young boy he started learning the scriptures etc. his interest was only in listening to and narrating stories of the Lord. He decided to spend his life in the service of the Lord and after some thinking chose to string flower garlands for the Lord at the temple every day. He used part of his hereditary property to buy some land and grow a flower garden. It had some rare flowers and also a lot of Tulasi plants, the favourite of Lord Vishnu. Everyday he got ready a garland for the Lord at the temple.

At that time southern Madurai was under the compassionate rule of king Vallabhadevan. He used to go in various disguises

Koviloor Digital Library
around the city at night to learn the condition of the lives of his subjects and on one such occasion found a Brahmin sleeping outside a house and enquired him. The Brahmin was on his way to Rameswaram after visiting Varanasi; as night had fallen



he decided to spend the night there. The king realized that the man was a great scholar and also very wise and invited him to stay with him. After spending his time listening to the teachings of the Brahmin for a few months, he sent him off with enough money to Rameswaram. The king, feeling remorse at having wasted his life in petty interests, sought the advice of the palace Guru Selvanambi, who told him to consult scholars in Vedas and Tatvas and find out the truth about the Supreme Being.

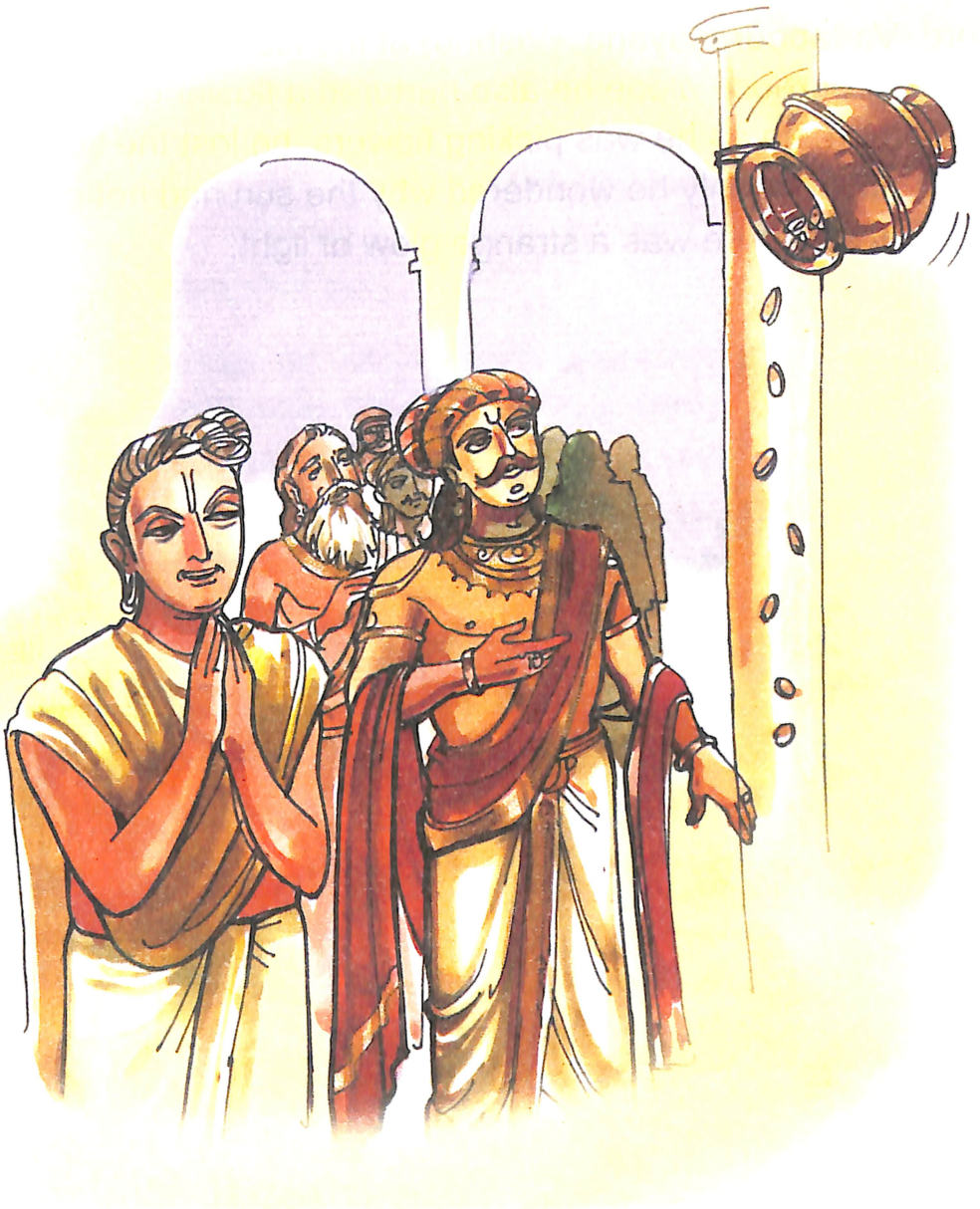
Accordingly the king made special arrangements to welcome scholars and wise men and offered a lot of gold tied on top of a pole to anyone who could give the correct explanation and make the gold to pour out. Though scholars came in droves and lectured, no one could give a satisfactory explanation. The Lord decided to bring forth the truth through Vishnuchitthar and bade him in his dream to go to the king's court. The Lord also appeared in the dream of Selvanambi and told him what would happen. Vishnuchitthar went to the palace the next morning and was welcomed by the king and the royal Guru. The other scholars assembled there thought that, as Vishnuchitthar had not studied under a Guru, he would not be able to succeed.

But to his own surprise, through the grace of the Lord, he was able to realize everything about the truth of the Universe, which was that the Lord Sri Narayana (Vishnu) was the omnipresent power, Who activated the whole universe. The pole with the gold on top bent down towards him and he untied and took it. Everyone in the assembly was taken by surprise; the king and others paid their obeisance to him. The king awarded him the title Bhattapiran and took him on a procession on a decorated elephant and Lord Vishnu, seated on the Garuda (kite) along with His consort accompanied by all the Devas appeared in the

Koviloor Digital Library

sky to the delight of Vishnuchitthar. At that instant he sang several 'Pallandu Paasurams' as if a mother would bless her child. This earned him the title 'Periaazhwar'.

He spent his entire life in singing verses about the Lord and making garlands for Him. He composed 469 Paasurams.



Koviloor Digital Library

Aandal

8

Srivilliputthur in Tamilnadu was the birth place of Periaazhwar, who was immersed in the devotion to Lord Ranganatha (Vishnu); he used to string scented flowers into garlands for the Lord Vadabadrasayana (Vishnu) at the local temple everyday. For that purpose alone he also nurtured a flower garden. One early morning as he was picking flowers, he lost the sense of time; but suddenly he wondered why the sun had not come up yet; but still there was a strange glow of light.

Koviloor Digital Library
He looked around the lush green leaves of the Tulasi plants. There, near one of the plants, he found a beautiful girl child. It was a Tuesday, the fourteenth day after new moon day in the Tamil month of Adi (July-August) in the year Nala. The plants showered their flowers on the child, while the birds were singing deliriously. The sun came up slowly and at last Periaazhwar took the child in his arms and set her down in front of his Lord and said as he had got her with His grace, he would submit the child to Him. His wife Viraja was delighted with the baby and accepted it with reverence. The couple named the child Godai. Even at a young age she was taught all the essential texts and the people of Sri Villiputhur considered her as their own daughter and cherished her.

Godai also, following her father, made garlands for the Lord and used to lose herself when he sang his Passurams and became a great devotee, which made Periaazhwar supremely happy. Godai herself began composing verses with great maturity; she saw the Lord in everything around her and began thinking of Him as her husband. She became lovelorn; she even dressed herself up as a bride to check if she was suitable for Him. Her state shocked Periaazhwar and he sought the Lord's counsel. Once when Periaazhwar had left the newly made garland and gone out, she thought if she wore it, it would gain more scent and the Lord also would be happy to wear it; thus she wore the garland for a while and kept it back in the basket. This went on for several days.

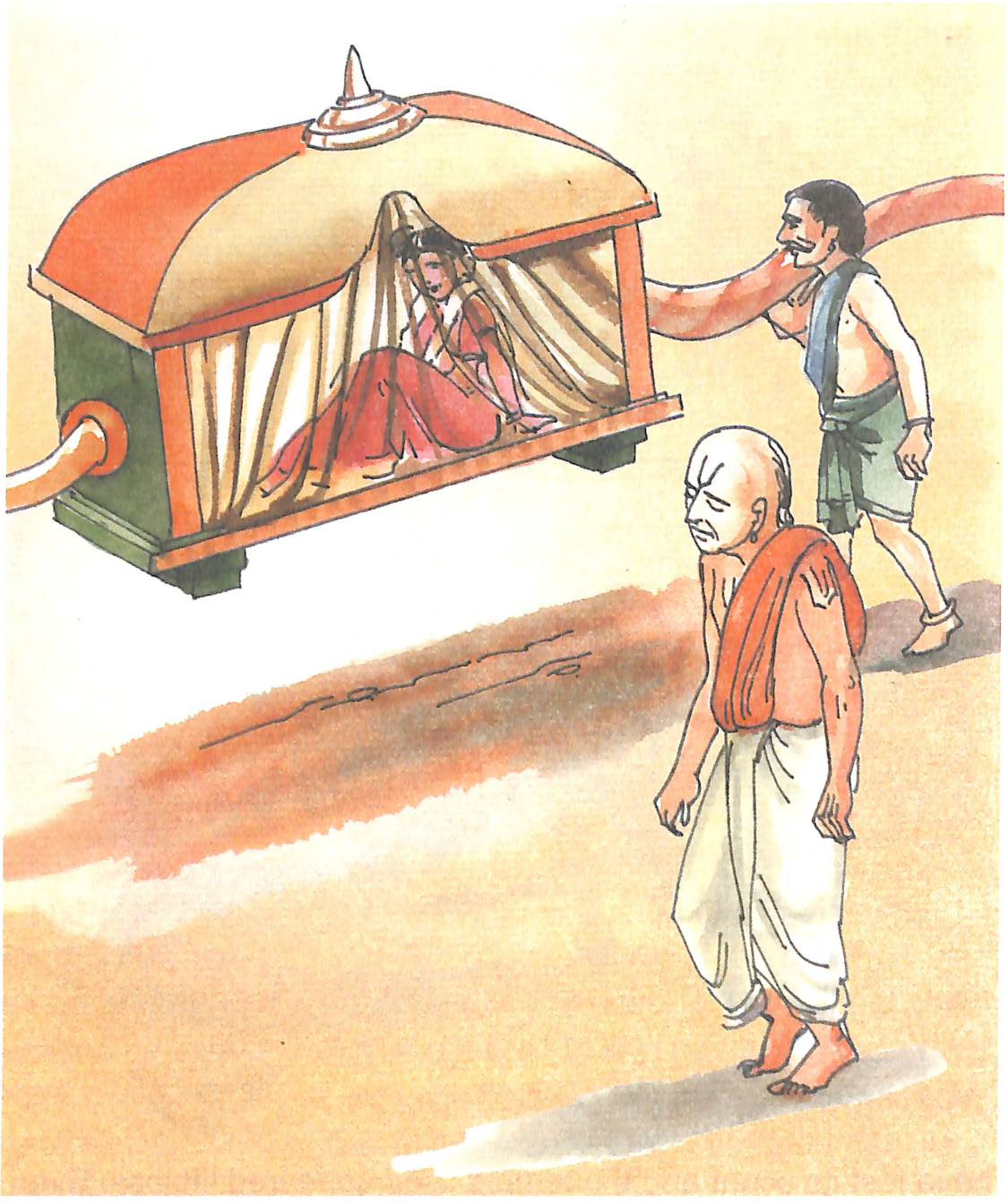
Not being aware of her action, the Aahwar carried on with his service. One day when Godai, as usual wore the garland and was lost in her dreams looking at her reflection in the well, her

father came there suddenly. He was shocked at what he saw; but he could not scold her either and told her kindly that what she did was not right and one should serve the Lord with reverence. She did not even hear what he was saying; but she realized he was unhappy and began to cry; upset at that, Periaazhawar told her with compassion not to wear the garland meant for the Lord again. But she answered, "but am I not His beloved?"

Her words took him aback. But he just took the freshly made garland and went to the temple and as usual decorated Lord Vadabadrasayi with it. But what he saw upset him even more; the usual beauty of the Lord was absent, the garland seemed to

have lost its scent and the temple itself appeared lifeless. Even after coming home the Azhwar was very disturbed and prayed to the Lord to forgive his daughter.

After remaining sleepless for a long time that night, when he finally slept the Lord appeared in his dream and said, “you don’t

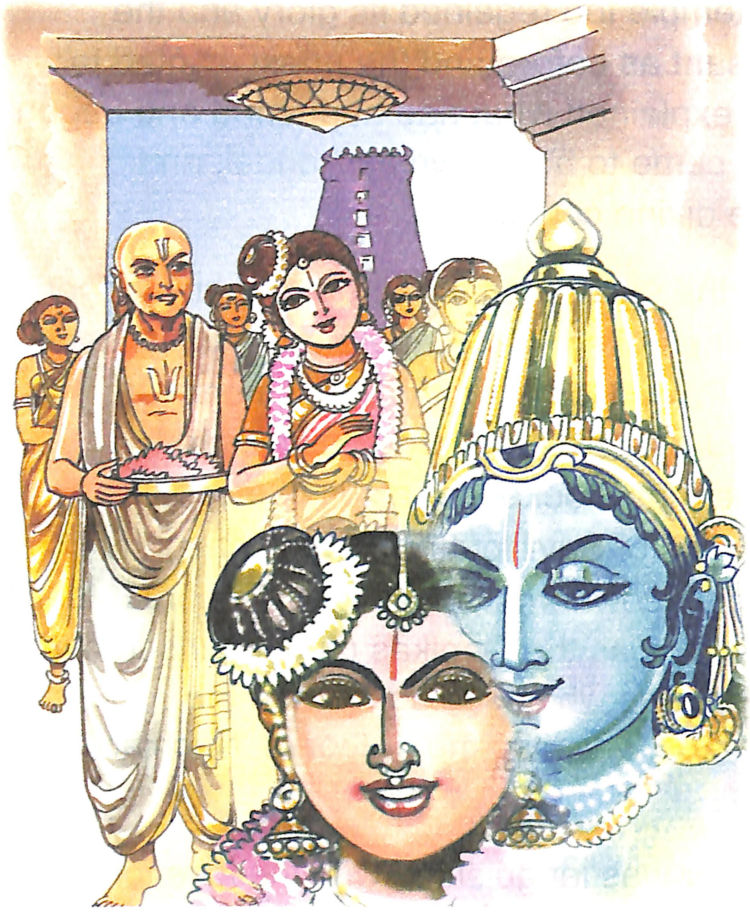


realize that your daughter has been born to do just what she did. I like only the garlands that she has already worn; only they have the right smell". The Azhwar then understood that the Lord's consort herself must have been born as his daughter and then onwards he made Godai wear the garland before he took

it to the temple. The temple too regained its glory and the flowers were as pleasant as before and the priest wanted to know the reason. He explained what had happened and began to regard Godai, who came to be known as Aandal, and Vadabadrasayi as the divine couple.

Godai could not bear the separation from her Lord any longer and began to long to be united with Him. As per tradition, she began observing the 'Pavai Nonbu' in the Tamil month of Margazhi (Decemebr-January) – unmarried girls used to observe this ritual when they looked for a suitable spouse – along with the young girls of Srivilliputthur, considering the place as the 'Aayarpadi' (cowherds colony), where Lord Krishna (Vishnu) lived and the girls as the Gopikas (young girls from the cowherd families). That was when she composed the 'Thiruppavai' verses. She was also the author of 'Nachiar Thirumozhi'.

Seeing that his daughter was languishing with the love for the Lord, Periaazhwar decided to go on a pilgrimage and took her first to Thirumalirunchola or Azhagarmalai; then he took her to Thiruppathi; but to no avail. Then he finally went to Srirangam with her and narrated the glories of Lord Ranganatha, in front of whom Godai stood as if in a trance. For several days she did not even sleep; and finally one night she fell asleep and what a dream she had! She dreamt the entire sequence of her wedding with her Lord. When she woke up feeling great happiness, she described her dream to her friend in poetry. Periaazhwar also came to know of her dream, but did not know what to do. He wanted to know whom she wanted to marry and went on narrating the names of the 108 holy centres of Lord Narayana



and at the mention of Srirangam and Ranganatha, Aandal looked coy, which made him understand her wish. He wondered how it could be possible to marry the great Lord Himself.

That night Lord Ranganatha appeared in his dream and bade him to bring Aandal to his temple; He also informed the temple authorities to go to Srivilliputthur and bring Aandal and her people with all the proper honours. The Aazhwar got his daughter decorated like a bride and took her in a palanquin, covered by a silk cloth so that no outsider could see her. When they reached the shrine of Ranganatha, she got off the palanquin and approached the Lord slowly and sat next to Him; a bright light engulfed the shrine and when that disappeared so had Aandal. Everyone realized that she had merged with the Supreme Being and felt deeply reverent. Periaazhwar went back to Srivillipputthur and continued his service to Lord Vadabadrasayi.

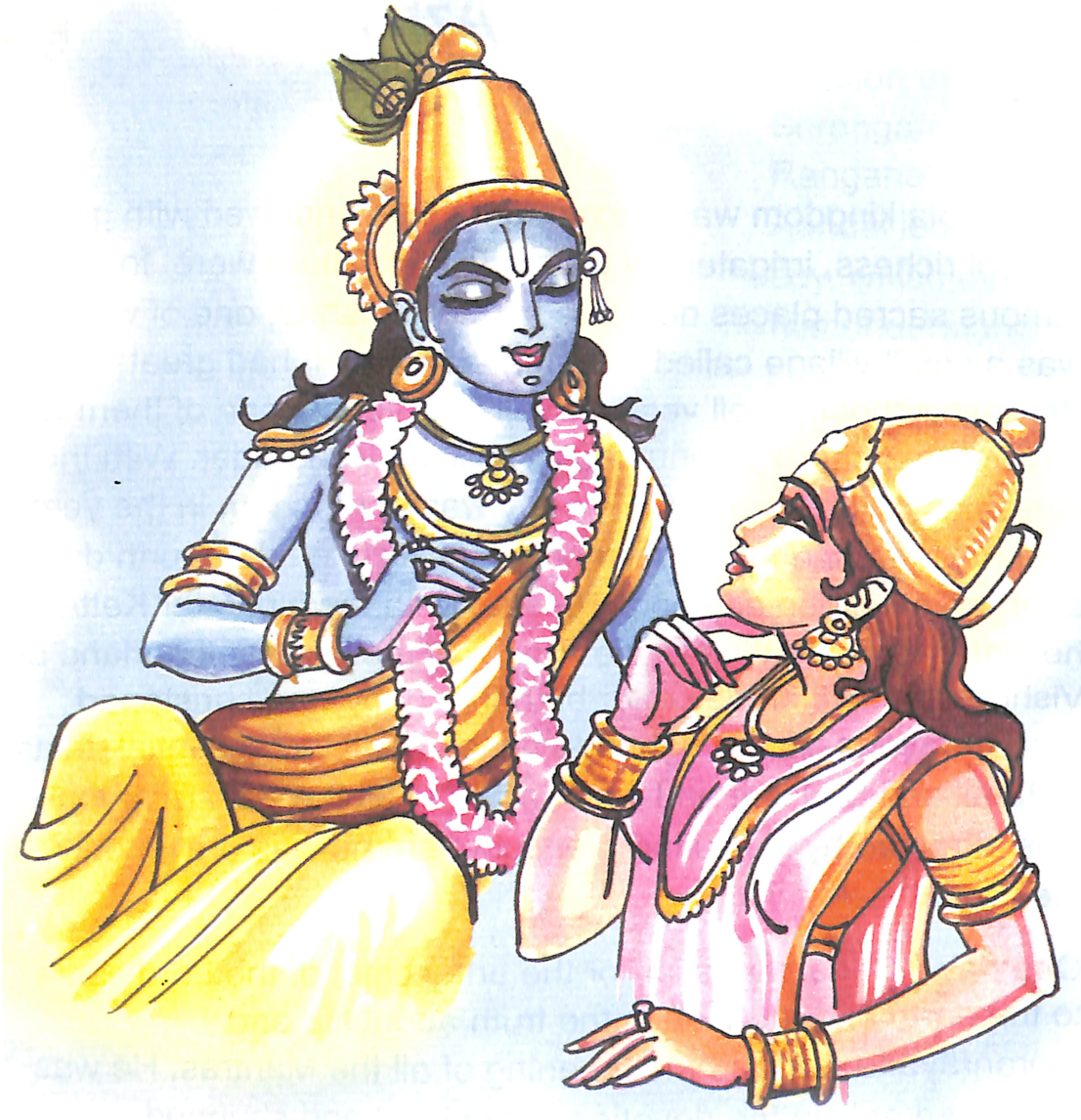
Koviloor Digital Library

Thondaradippodi Azhwar 9

The Chola kingdom was once upon a time endowed with great natural richess, irrigated by Cauvery river. There were forty famous sacred places dedicated to Lord Vishnu, one of which was a small village called Thirumandangudi. It had great Brahmin scholars well versed in all four Vedas; one of them was a devotee of Lord Vishnu known as Vedavisharadar. With the blessings of the Lord a male baby was born to him in the year Prabhava, during the Tamil month Margazhi on the fourth day after the full moon day on a Tuesday with the birth star Kettai; he was the incarnation of the aspect of the Vyjayanti garland of Vishnu. The twelfth day after birth the baby was christened Vipranarayana. At the right age he learnt all the essential texts in Tamil and Sanskrit and was trained in all the arts. Everyone was attracted by his cultured attitude, but he was drawn only to the Lord.

One day , 'Senai Mudaliar' or the army chief of the Lord came to the earth and taught him the truth about life and Vipranrayana realized the meaning of all the Mantras. He was immersed only in the devotion to the Lord and shunned marriage also. Suddenly one day he decided to go on a pilgrimage of all the sacred centres of the Lord and chose to visit Srirangam first. There he went to the temple right away and was lost in the beautiful sight of the Lord lying on the snake bed with His two spouses at His feet. He decided that the only mission in life was to serve the Lord; making garlands for Him was the service he chose. Hence he organized a flower garden

Koviloor Digital Library

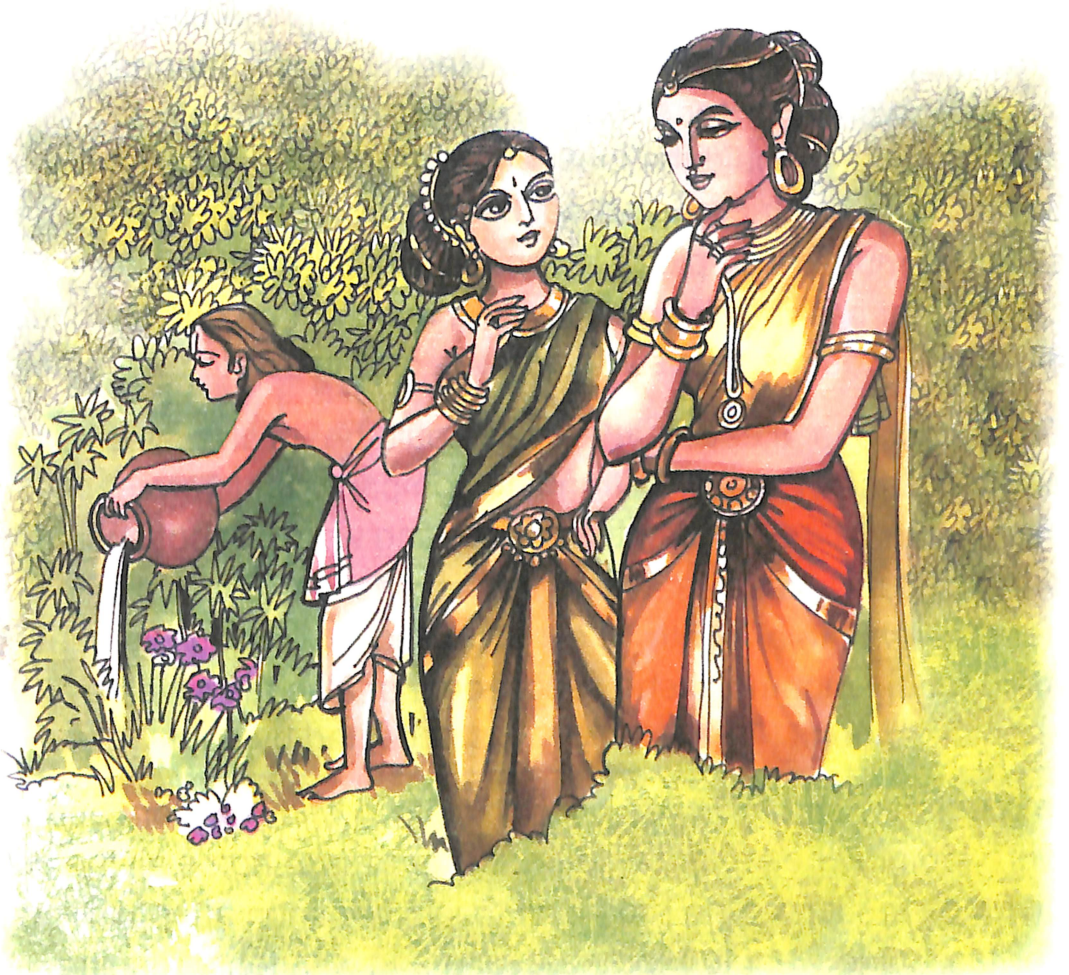


with not only exotic scented flowers, but also several Tulasi plants. He built a small hut for himself in the garden. Everyday he would string garlands with the seasonal flowers and after adorning the Lord with them, he would get food from the houses of Brahmins.

So lost was he in the love for his Lord that feminine beauty did not even enter his mind, in fact he did not even seem to realize

the difference between the male and the female. He appeared like an innocent child to others. One day goddess Lakshmi asked the Lord, “does Vipranarayana know the difference between his love for you and the way a man would love a woman?” The Lord replied, “he does not know now, but he should have to do it soon”.

At that time there were two young beautiful dancers in Thirukarambanur called Devi and Devadevi; the latter had no equal in beauty and intelligence. A Chola king was then ruling from Uraiyur near Trichy as his capital and the people were happy under him. He patronized scholars and artists of all kind.



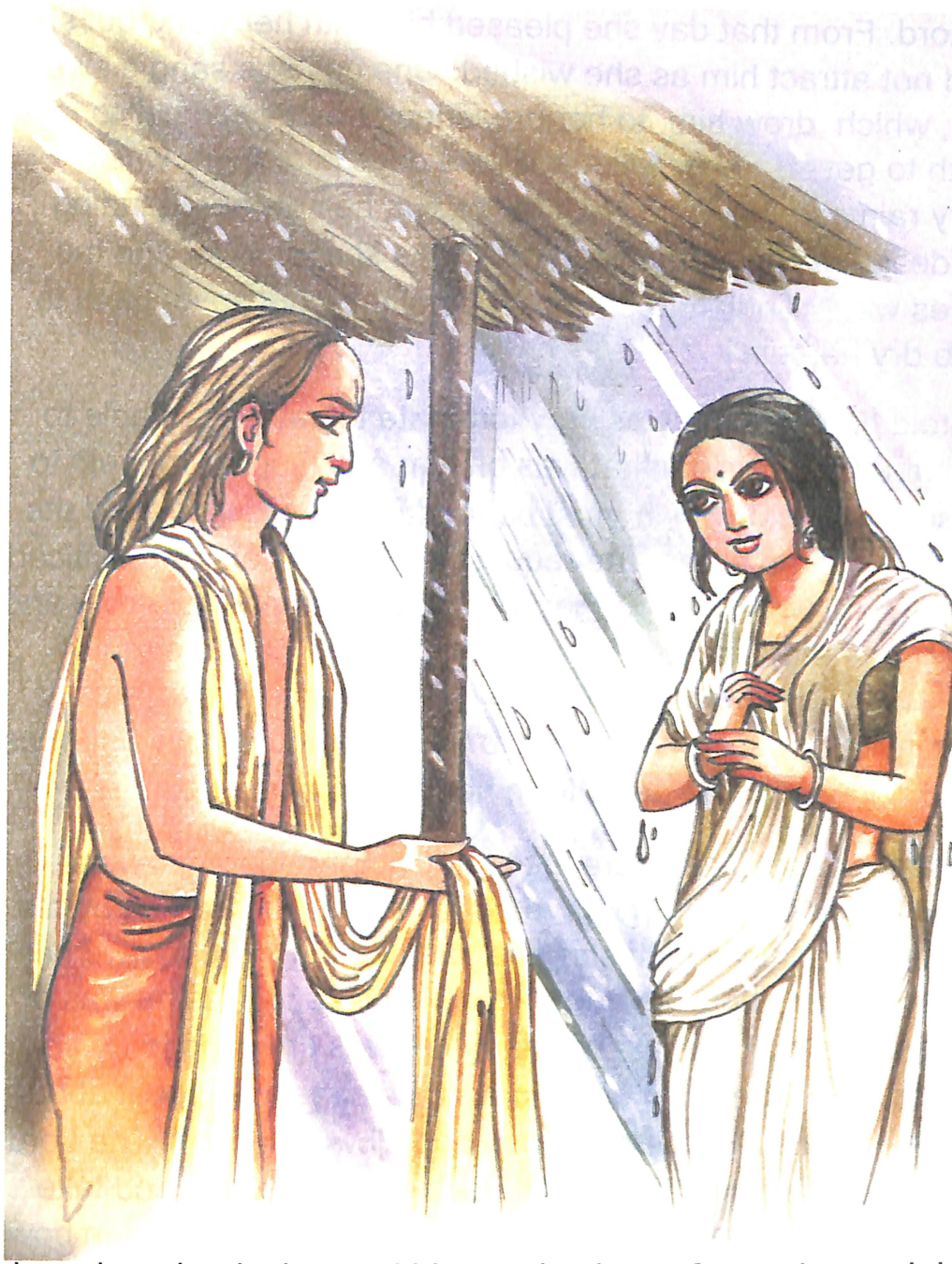
Coming to know of this the sisters wished to perform in front of him and receive gifts. The king was very pleased with their dance and music and presented them a lot of very rich gifts.

On their way back Devadevi wanted to visit Srirangam and worship Lord Ranganatha (Vishnu). Devi too was inclined to do the same. Along with their friends they set out on their journey and was attracted by Vipranarayana's garden on the way; Devadevi wondered who could have made such a divine garden; Devi assured her it belonged to the great devotee Vipranarayana, who was tending it for the service of the Lord. Immediately they started to go in search of Vipranarayana and stood with awe, when they saw him watering the plants. Drawn by his holy appearance, Devadevi began uttering romantic words to her sister in an attempt to attract his attention; but he paid the least attention to her or what she said. She tried all her tricks to attract him but in vain. She said to her sister he must be stupid or a eunuch. But Devi chided her saying that he was the most learned man, but he has shunned all worldly desires as his interest was only in serving the Lord.

She refused to accept that anyone could be uninterested in love and romance. Devi told her not to compare him to ordinary mortals and it was wrong to say insulting words about such a person. But Devadevi challenged that she would turn him into her slave within a month; Devi accepted to work as Devadevi's maid for six months, if she succeeded, or else the reverse should happen. The challenge was accepted by both.

Immediately she removed her rich clothes and jewellery and wore simple ones and asked her sister to take home all the gifts given by the king. She promised to join her soon after fulfilling her task. She went to Vipranarayana and with tears running

Koviloor Digital Library



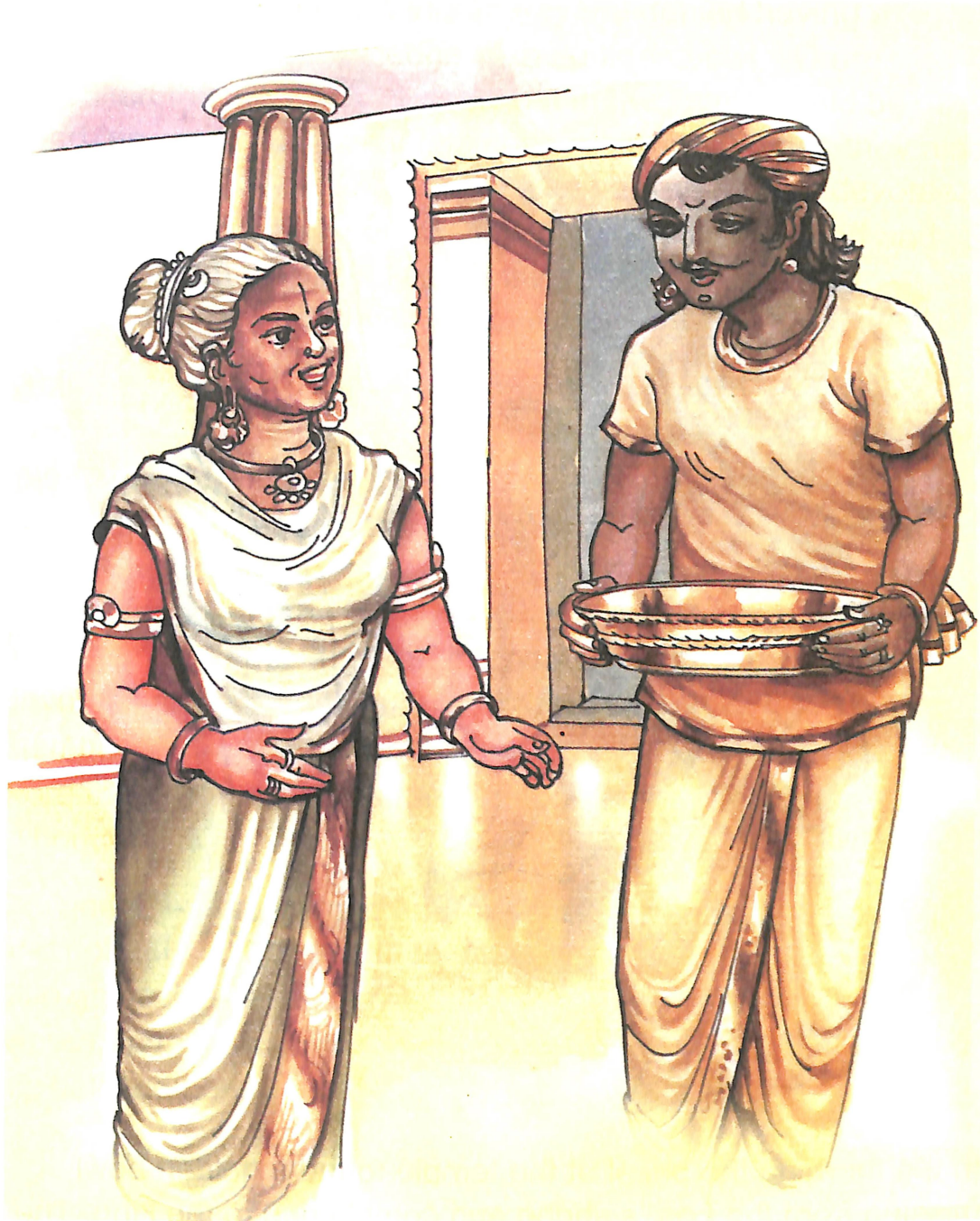
down her cheeks begged him to give her refuge; she explained that she did not like to live the way other women of her community lived and wanted to learn the true path for salvation from a great person like him. The innocent Vipranarayana believed what she said and allowed her to help in the service of

the Lord. From that day she pleased him with her work, but she could not attract him as she wished. One day she sang a sweet song, which drew him to her presence ; he advised her to take a bath to get rid of her fatigue. Three days later there was a heavy rain and when he went to the hut, he saw her standing outside in the rain and invited her in. As she was wet and the clothes were clinging to her body, he offered his upper cloth to her to dry herself.

She told him that she was very fortunate to have been able to dry herself with a cloth that was on him and made a request to massage his feet, which must be tired from walking around the garden. He granted her the request and thus she slowly enticed him. After a while she got her original clothes and jewellery and wore them and attracted him further. The two became really close and lived like man and wife for some time. One day Devadevi expressed her desire to visit her mother and sister; as he did not want to be away from her, he accompanied her.

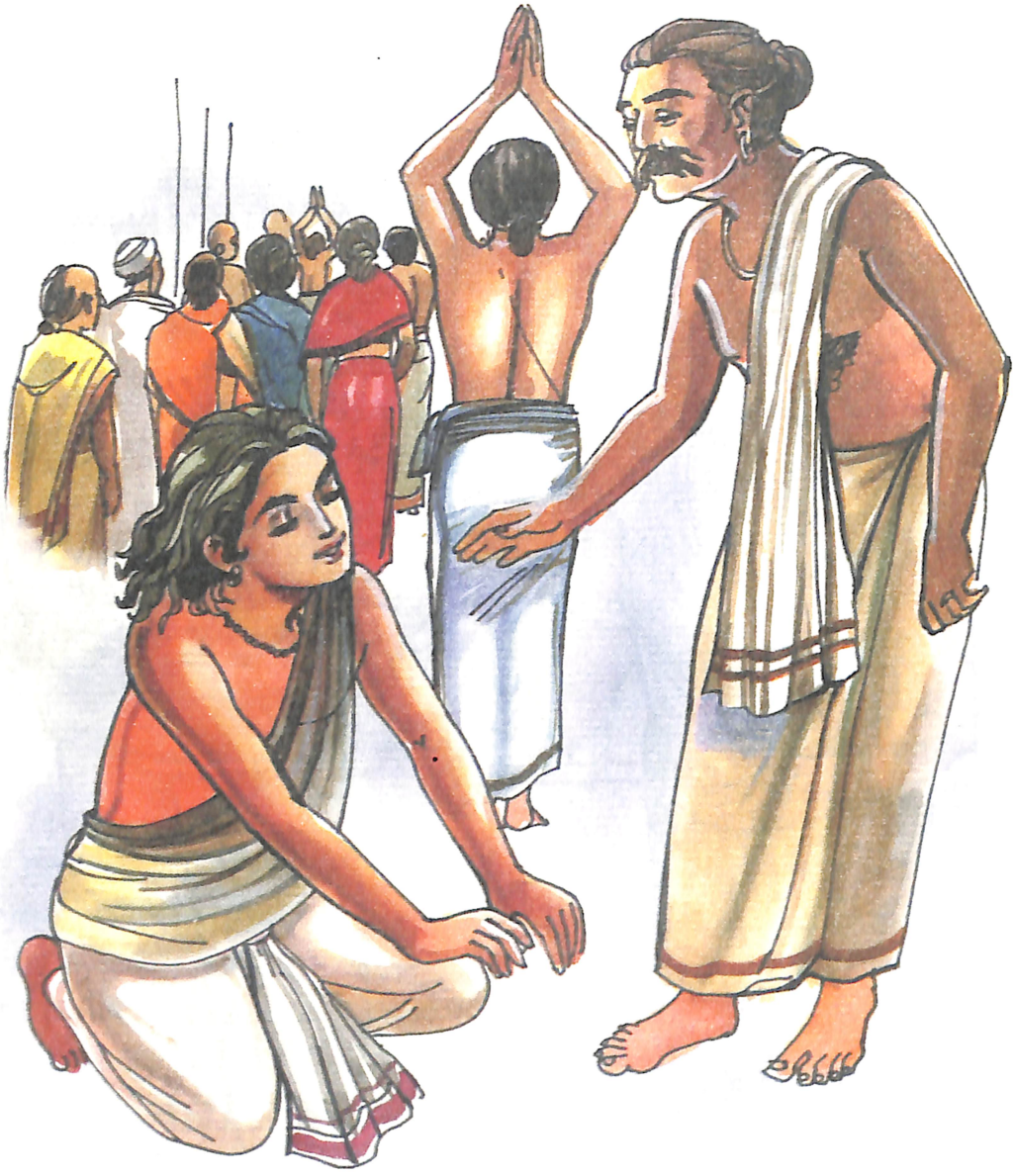
Her mother and Devi appreciated her victory; Vipranarayana stayed on there itself and gave her all the wealth earned by his ancestors and finally felt sorry he had nothing more to give her. Her mother advised Devadevi to send him away, as he was of no more use to them; as her daughter was unwilling to do so, she herself chased him off. Vipranarayana feeling upset about his fate, went and sat in a garden and slowly slept off. The Lord, witnessing His devotee's plight, decided to save him and take him back on the path of salvation. He went with the golden bowl meant for his worship to Devadevi's house and knocked at the door. When the mother opened the door and questioned Him, He said that he was Vipranarayana's messenger and had come to give the golden bowl to Devadevi. She told Him to send

Koviloor Digital Library



Vipranarayana back as Devadevi was upset due to his separation; He too went and gave the message to Virpranarayana. He went back to his beloved and they had a happy reunion.

Koviloor Digital Library



In the morning the priest at the temple found a golden bowl missing from the Lord's shrine and complained to the king. The king's servants located the bowl in Devadevi's house and arrested her mother and Vipranarayana and brought them to the king. On being questioned, Devadevi's mother said that it was given to her by Vipranrayana's messenger

Koviloor Digital Library

Azhagiyamanavalan. But Vipranarayana denied having a messenger or any knowledge of the golden bowl. When consulted the ministers advised that the woman should be freed, as she could not be faulted in receiving the gift; they also suggested to leave Vipranarayana as he was a great devotee of the Lord and could not be suspected. She was released and Vipranarayana was jailed for the night. He believed that everything was the Lord's wish and let His will be done.

That night Lord Vishnu appeared in the king's dream and explained what had happened. The king, regretting his decision, released Vipranarayana. He, in turn, realized that it was the Lord's doing to remove the ignorance from his mind and decided to go to the temple and pray. The king sent him in a royal palanquin to the temple. Vipranrayana went to the temple and after praying to the Lord, he paid his obeisance to the devotees and wore the dust from their feet on his head. From then he was known as "Thondaradipodi Azhwar" – Azhwar who wore the dust (podi) from the feet (adi) of the devotees (Thondar).

Devadevi too understood how she had wasted her life so long and donated all her wealth to the Lord and His devotees. She also gained salvation through her association with Vipranarayana, who continued to devote his life in the service of his beloved Lord.

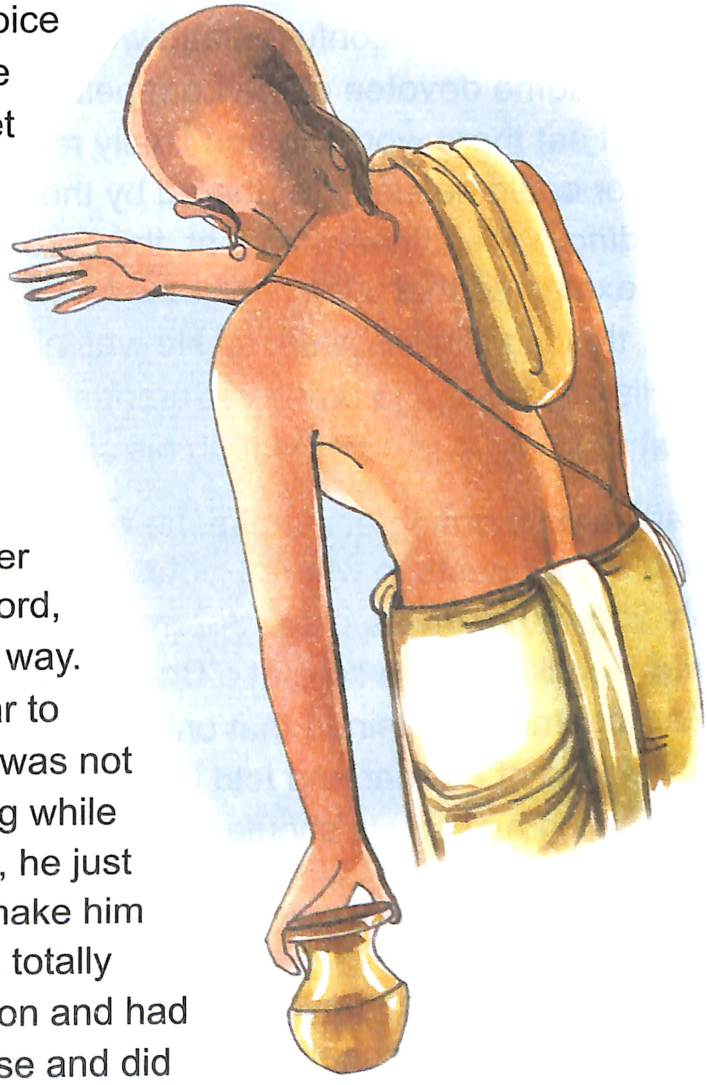
Koviloor Digital Library

Thiruppaanaazhwar 10

During the prosperous reign of Chola kings the Paanar quarters in Srirangam had the members of the community engaged in singing with the string instrument Veena or Yazh, to the delight of everyone; but at the same time they were treated as

Koviloor Digital Library

untouchables by the forward communities. But among these Paanars was born, in the year Purdurmati in the Tamil month of Kartigai (November-December) on a Wednesday, a devotee with his birth star Rohini; he was the incarnation of Lord Vishnu's Srivatsa aspect. Every morning after bath he would go with his Veena to the southern bank of the river Cauvery. As an untouchable he was not allowed to enter the river to cross it to go to the temple of Lord Ranganatha. There he would sing devotion filled songs on the Lord in his attractive voice accompanying it on the Veena. He would forget the external world, lost in his devotion to the Lord.



On one such day, when he was singing, Lokasarangamuni, a Brahmin, who used to take water from the river for the service of the Lord, found him blocking his way. He wanted Thiruppanar to move away; but as he was not in the practice of talking while engaged in his service, he just clapped his hands to make him move. But Paanar was totally immersed in his devotion and had forgotten everything else and did

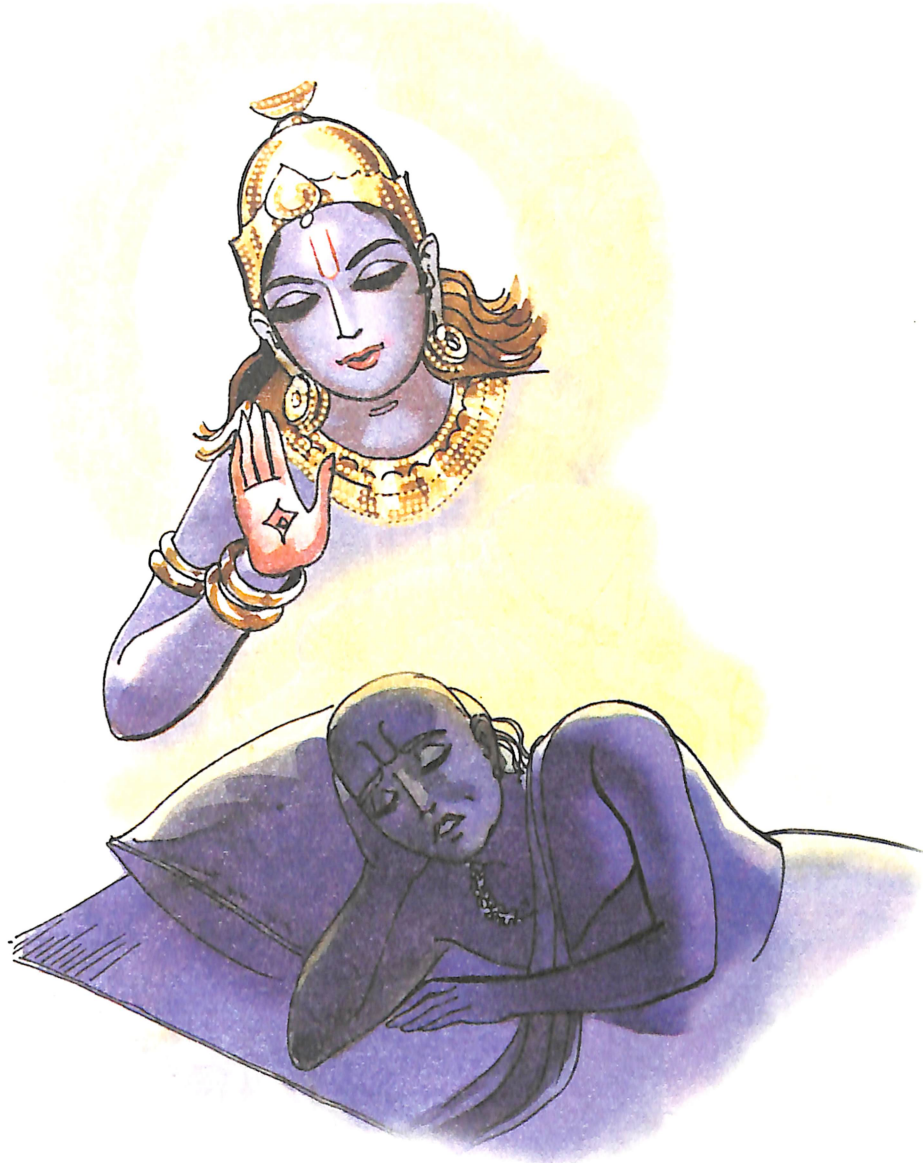
not hear the hand clapping. Feeling enraged Sarangamuni thought that the untouchable was arrogant; therefore he threw a stone at him angrily. The stone hit Paanar on his forehead and he started bleeding profusely; only then he came out of his trance. Feeling very upset for having blocked the Brahmin's path, he moved off from there.

Sarangamuni then collected water in the golden pot and went to the temple and approached the Lord's sanctum to clean; there he found the forehead of the Lord's image bleeding. Sarangamuni was confused and wondered whether it was the sign of some devotee of the Lord being in trouble. Till evening he just sat there worrying and finally returned home. He neither ate nor could he sleep, bothered by the memory of the Lord bleeding. When finally he slept, the Lord appeared in his dream and explained that it was because he hit His devotee and hurt him, that He Himself bled, as He was always bound by the love of His devotees. He advised Sarangamuni to find Paanar the next morning and carry him on his shoulder to the temple.

Early next morning at sunrise, he completed his bath and went with other priests to where Paanar was singing in deep devotion shining with a divine glow. Sarangamuni fell at his feet. Paanar was shocked to the core at a Brahmin paying obeisance to him. Sarangamuni explained that only then he had realized the greatness of Paanar and told him about the Lord's order. Then he carried him on his shoulder accompanied by other Brahmins to the Lord's shrine.

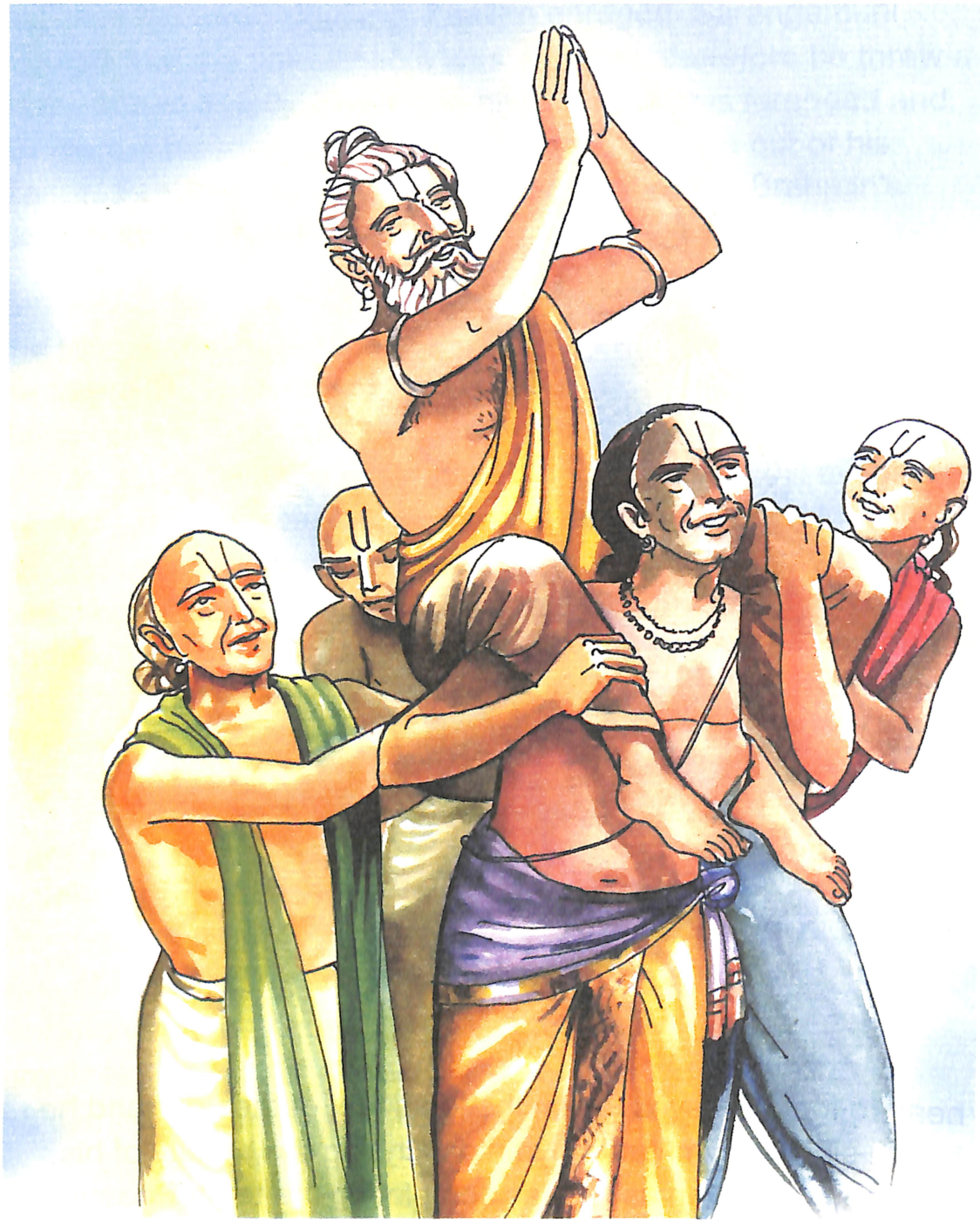
Paanar, who was till then never allowed to come near the temple, was thrilled beyond imagination; with tears of happiness trickling down his cheeks he drank the beauty of the Lord from

Koviloor Digital Library



head to foot. His eyes fell on the lotus feet of the Lord and he began singing hymn after hymn describing the beauty of his beloved Lord. Even as he was completing the tenth Paasuram, the Lord made him merge with him. All those present watched this wonderful sight and were immensely moved by the Paanar's devotion and the Lord's compassion. As he was

Koviloor Digital Library



carried on the shoulders of Sarangamuni he was also known as Munivahana and because of his skill in composing lilting poems as Kaveeswarar.

Thirumangai Azhwar 11

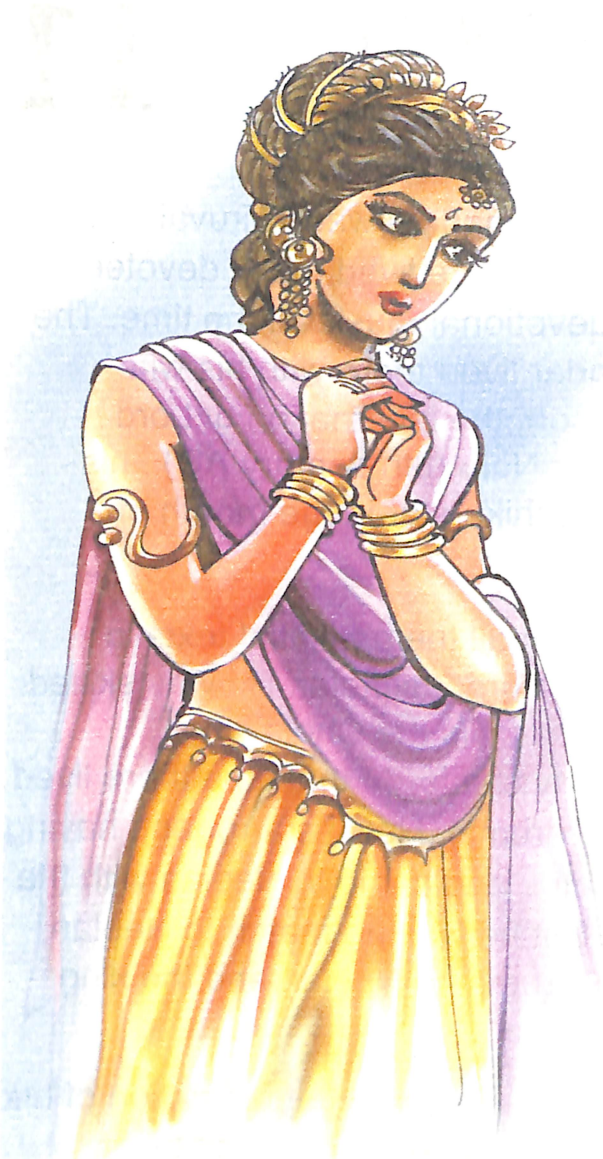
One of the divisions of the Chola kingdom was Thiruvalinadu, within which was Thirukuraiyalur. There lived many devotees of the Lord and one could hear devotional music all the time. The Chola king's army chief Aalinadar lived there with his wife Vallithiru. To them was born a son, the incarnation of Lord Vishnu's Sarnga bow in the year Nala (8th century AD) ; his birthday was a Thursday with Krithika star in the month of Karthigai. He was christened Neelan.

From the age of five Neelan learnt all the essential texts in Tamil and Sanskrit and became a great scholar. He was skilled in warfare also. Learning about all this the Chola king appointed him as one of his army chiefs. At that time there lived a famous poet called Narkavi Perumal. He was arrogant, having defeated several poets in debates and came to Neelan with the aim of winning over him also. But he was no match to Neelan and gave off his title Narkavi Perumal to Neelan and the king too awarded numerous gifts to him.

Neelan won several wars for the king, who in appreciation of his services, crowned him king of Aali Nadu with the capital at Thirumangai. He was also known as Parakalan for having defeated several enemies. He was compassionate towards his subjects; but he was also interested in physical pleasures due to his youth and valour.

Sumangalai was a leader of Apsaras; she was serving Lord Vishnu with a fan. One day she came down to the earth and was admiring the beauty of mount Himalaya. Then she saw a

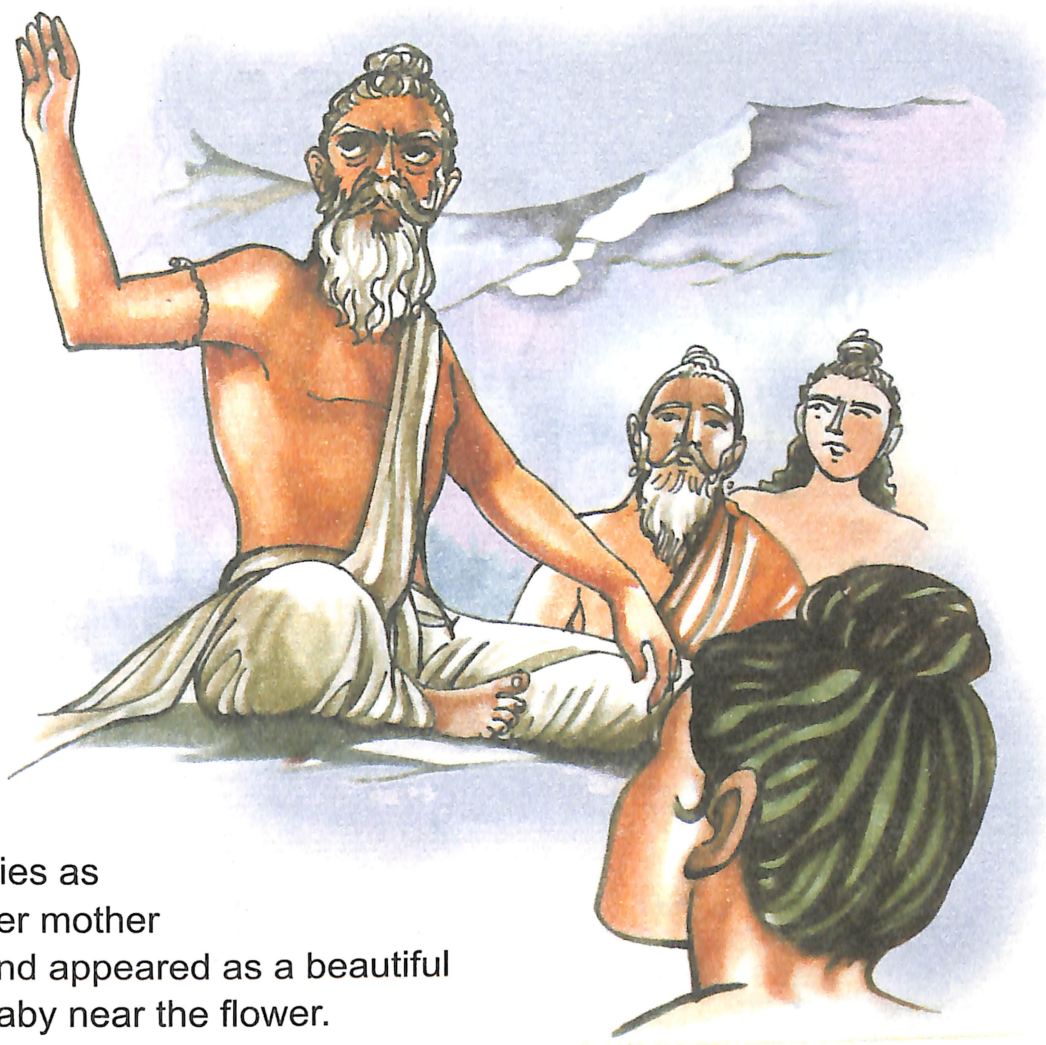
Koviloor Digital Library



great devotee of the Lord, saint Kapila, preaching the greatness of the Lord to several other saints. One of them was rather ugly, at whom Sumangalai laughed with derision. This enraged saint Kapila and he cursed her to be born on the earth and become the wife of a human being. Shocked at this she pleaded with him to pardon her.

Taking pity on her, Kapila said that he had cursed her thus for a purpose. The king of Thirumangai was valourous and also amourous. She should go and marry him and reform him to become a devotee of the Lord. Then she could return to heaven and resume her duties.

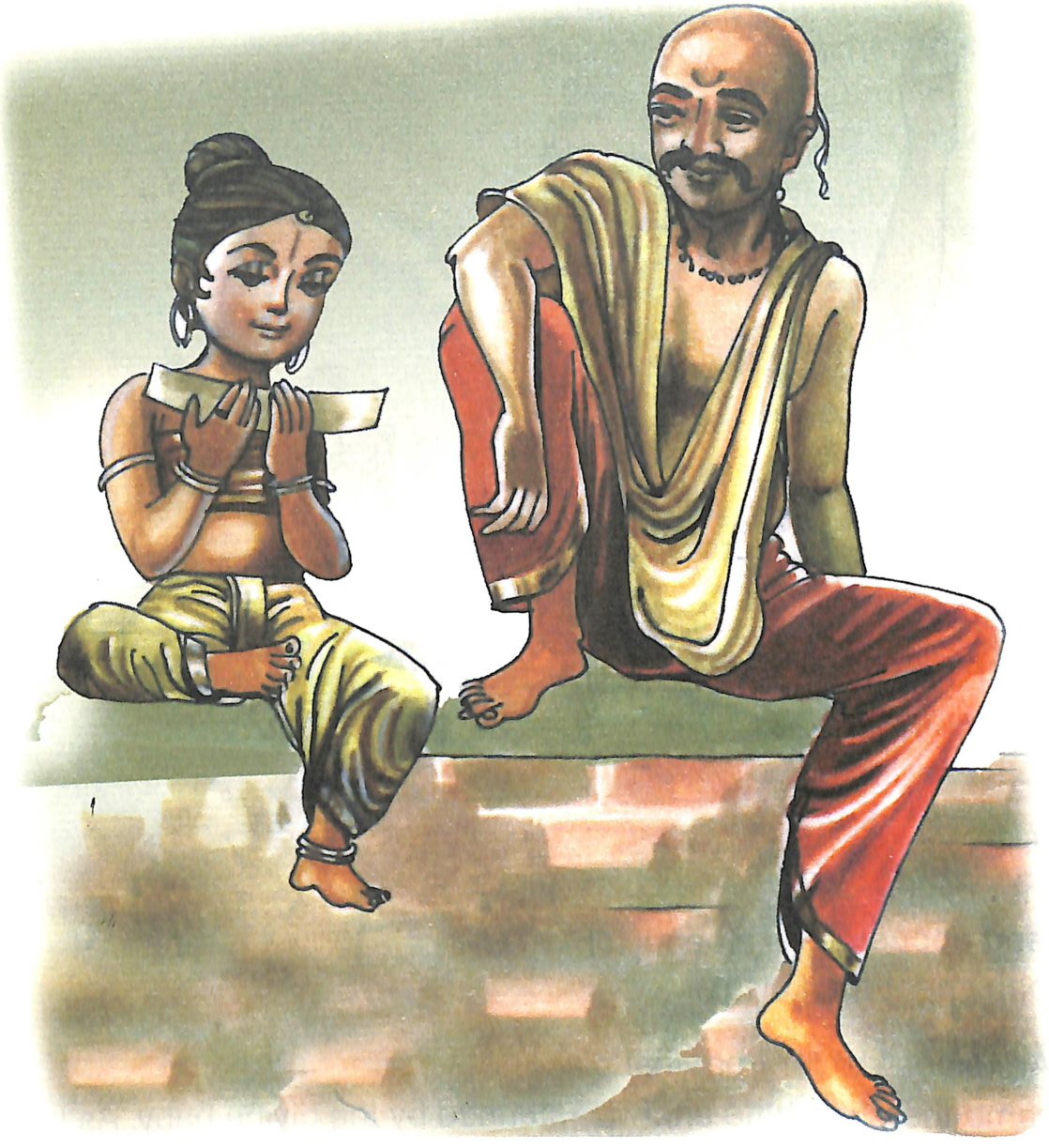
Sumangalai came down with her friends to the earth to Thirunangoor; they were attracted by a tank full of lotus blooms and decided to swim and bathe in it. After a long time it was time for the heavenly damsels to go beck and they went away, leaving her behind.She realized what had happened and decided it was the Lord's will. She accepted one of the beautiful



lilies as
her mother
and appeared as a beautiful
baby near the flower.

An expert doctor from that place
came there to bathe and was stunned by the divine baby. As he had no children, he took the baby to his wife to her great delight. They named her Kumudavalli and brought her up lovingly. She was well educated beginning from her fifth year and grew up to be a gracious intelligent maiden with great devotion to the Lord. Her parents decided to get her married and asked her opinion. She explained to him the reason behind her birth. When her father offered to go and talk to the king

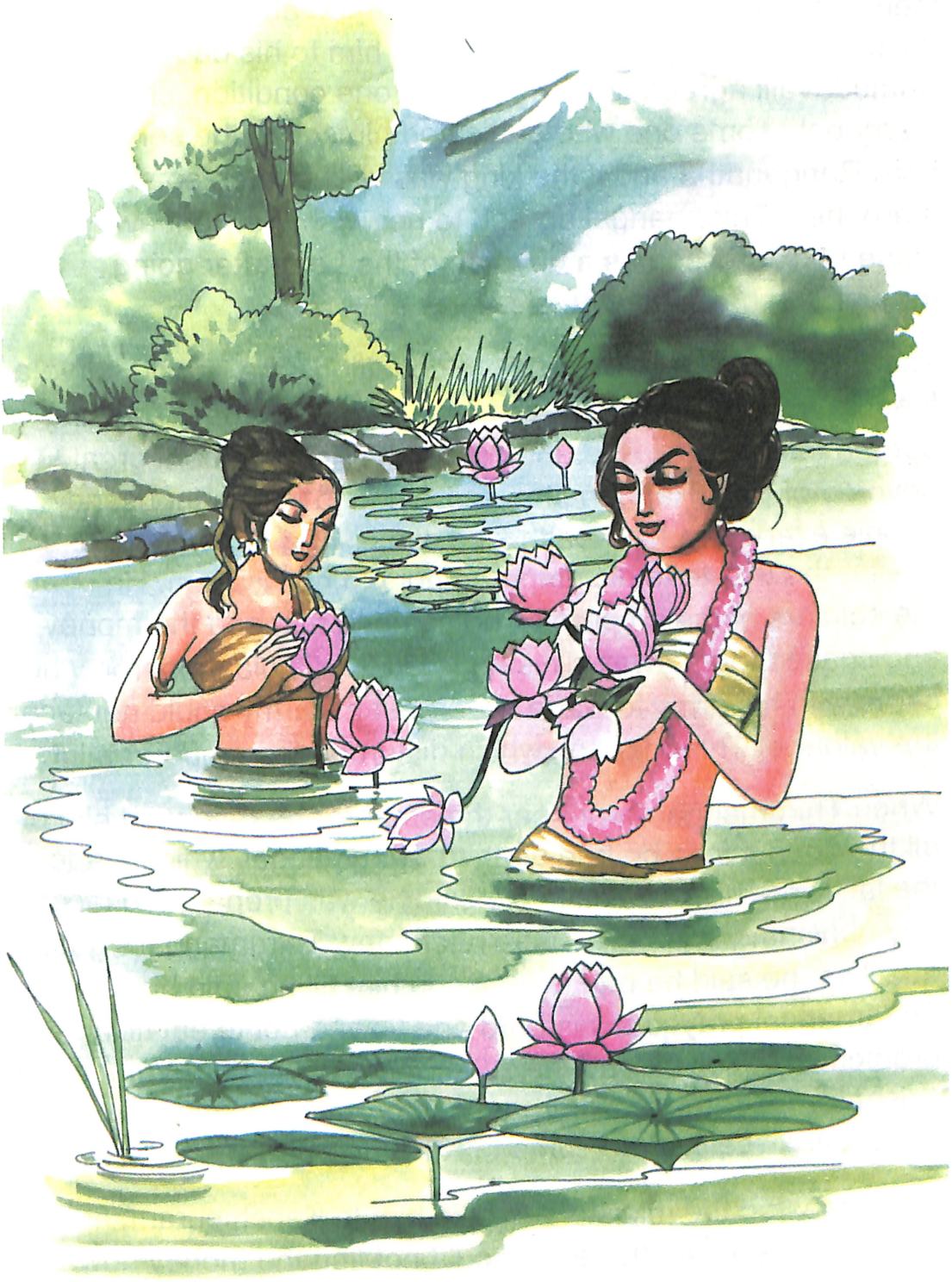
Koviloor Digital Library



Thirumangai, she told him that the king himself would approach them one day; she also told him of two messages to be given to him.

In the meantime some people told the king about the beauty of Kumudavalli, which made him fall in love with her; he decided that she alone could become his wife. As he approached her

Koviloor Digital Library



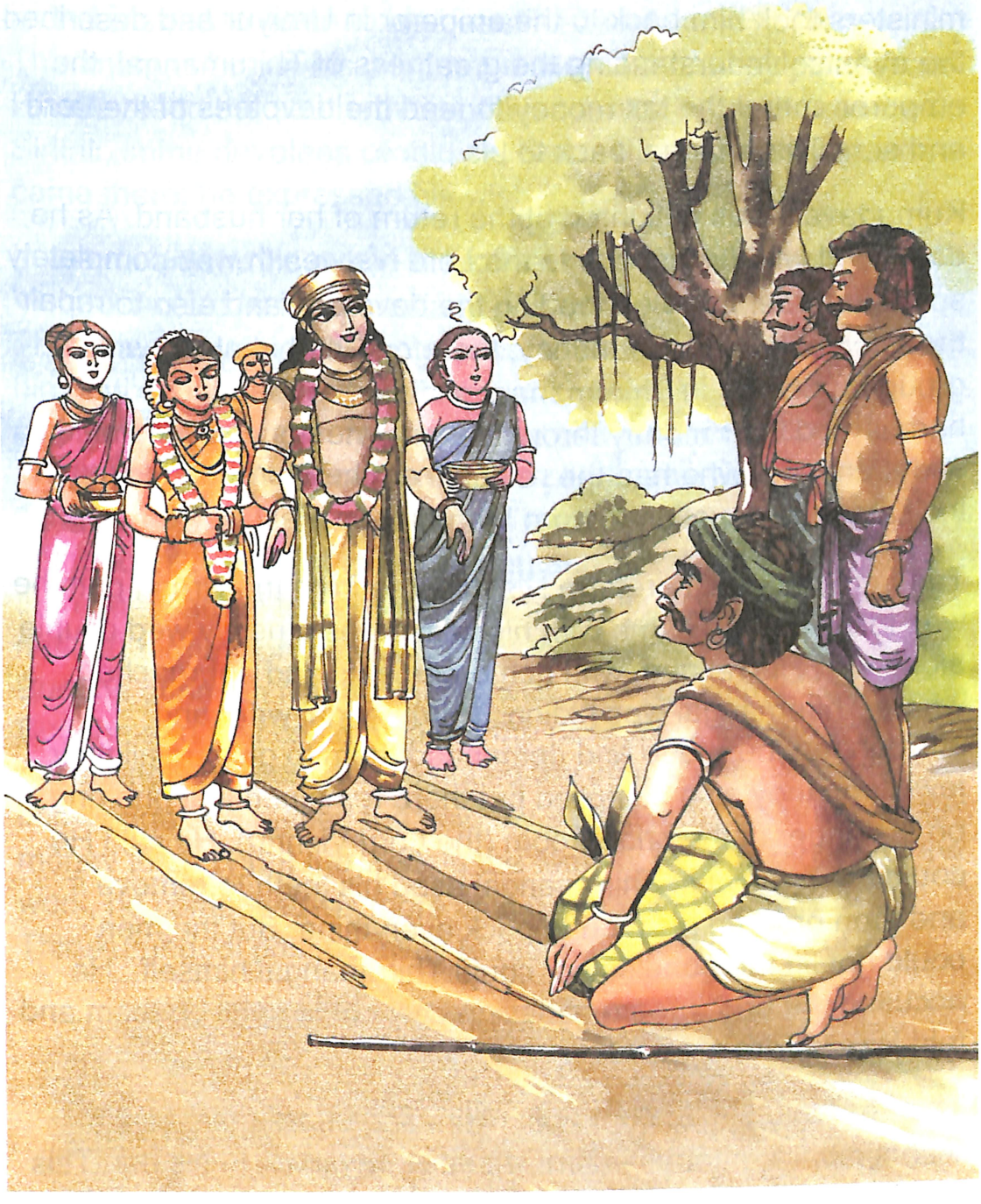
house along with his ministers, she was on the terrace; both of them looked at each other. Being informed about his visit, the doctor welcomed him and introduced him to his daughter. Kumudavalli agreed to marry him on one condition; she would marry only some one who dedicated himself to the service of Lord Ranganatha and if the king was willing to do so she would marry him. Thirumangai agreed to her wish; he went away and came back dressed as a devotee of the Lord after going through the necessary rituals.

Then Kumudavalli had one more condition – he should serve a feast to a thousand devotees of the Lord every day. The king agreed to that also. After their marriage he became a great devotee of Lord Ranganatha; as he had to feed a thousand people every day, his wealth also diminished and he stopped paying the tribute to his emperor, nor did he visit him. He beat the soldiers of the emperor, who came to demand the money and chased them away. This angered the Chola emperor, who came with his army to wage a war; but his army could not face the valour of Thirumangai, which disturbed the emperor a lot.

When Thirumangai went near the emperor he reminded him of all the good things he had done to Thirumangai, which made the latter rue his behaviour. He said he was prepared to face any punishment. As the Chola ruler knew Thirumangai's good qualities, he said he had to imprison him till he paid his tax. Thirumangai prayed to his Lord and vowed not to eat till his problem was solved and fasted for three days. Lord Varadaraja (Vishnu) appeared in his dream and promised to give him the necessary wealth, if he came to Kanchipuram.

He requested the ministers to take him to Kanchipuram; but when they reached there, he could not find the money however

Koviloor Digital Library



much he searched; feeling tired he fell asleep. Again Lord Varadaraja informed him in his dream that the mound of wealth was on the banks of river Vegavathi. Thirumangai went there with the ministers and finding the wealth paid his tax; the ministers took him back to the emperor in Uraiyur and described the events. Understanding the greatness of Thirumangai, the emperor spend the tax money to feed the devotees of the Lord and sent Thirumangai back to his place.

Kumudavalli was delighted at the return of her husband. As he continued with his service to the Lord his wealth was completely spent. In order to go on feeding the devotees and also to repair the temple, he needed money; therefore, he hid along with a group of robbers in Thirumanangollai and robbed those who had earned their money through wrong means. But he would spare anyone, who had the red sign on their forehead to indicate their devotion to Lord Vishnu.

The Lord decided to reform His devotee from the wrong path he was following. He came with his consort as a newly wed couple along with His retinue, with rich ornaments and approached where Thirumangai was hiding. Thirumangai went and surrounded the group and demanded them to give up all their jewellery; they also complied but there remained just one ring on the finger of the bridegroom (the Lord Vishnu). He said He could not remove it; Thirumangai used his teeth to remove it and then ordered his men to pack everything. But the men could not lift the bundles nor could Thirumangai himself. He accused the bridegroom of having cast some spell on them and told Him to remove it.

The Lord told him to come near Him and uttered the 'Ashtakshara mantra' – Ohm Namo Narayana – in his ear. This

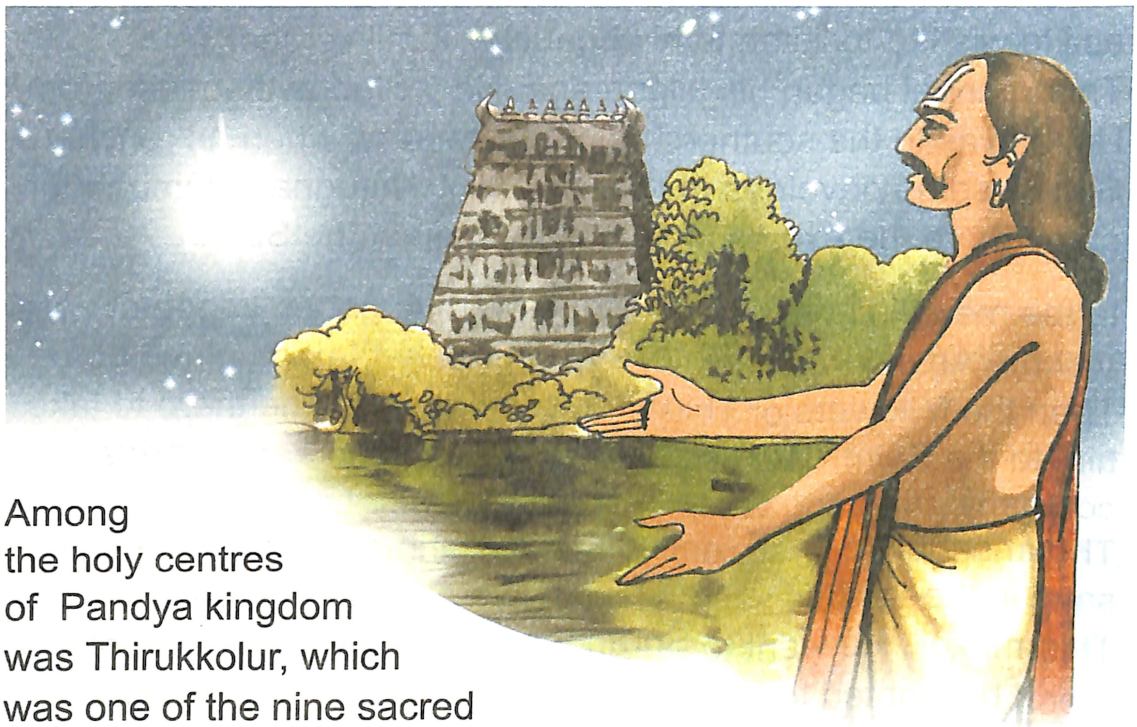
Koviloor Digital Library

was a revelation to Thirumangai and as he was thanking Him, the Lord and His people disappeared. He began singing the praise of the Lord, who appeared with His consort in space and ordered him to visit all the sacred places of the Lord and sing, as He wished to listen to his beautiful Tamil verses. Thus Thirumangai began his pilgrimage. He visited every place from Himalayas to the southern tip of the country; when he reached Sirkali, some devotees of Saivite Saint Thirugnanasambandar came there; he expressed his wish to meet the Saint.

In the meantime he asked his followers to get an image of Lord Vishnu. An old Vaishnavite lady offered her image of the Lord. Then the followers of Thirugnansambandar came there to take him to the Saint. The two of them delighted in each other's company and sang verses in praise of their Lords. Then Thirumangai Azhwar continued his pilgrimage. The verses he sang in the various sacred places were known as 'Periya Thirumozhi'. He went to Srirangam and worshipped the Lord there; he wanted to build new structures in the temple and needed money for the work. His ministers said that there was a Buddha shrine in Nagapattinam with a rich golden image of Buddha and that could help get the necessary wealth. Accordingly he went and removed the image without anyone's knowledge and melted the gold; by selling it, he earned enough money to carry out the work in the temple. On completion of the work, he composed six more sets of verses and finally at Thirukurungudi passed away to reach the feet of the Lord.

Koviloor Digital Library

Madurakavi Azhwar 12



Among the holy centres of Pandya kingdom was Thirukkolur, which was one of the nine sacred centres dedicated to Lord Vishnu, known as Navathirupathi. The people there were devotees of Lord Vishnu. In one of the Brahmin families there was born in the 9th century AD Madurakavi; his birth day was in the Tamil month of Chittirai, the fourteenth day after the new moon, a Friday with the star Chitra.

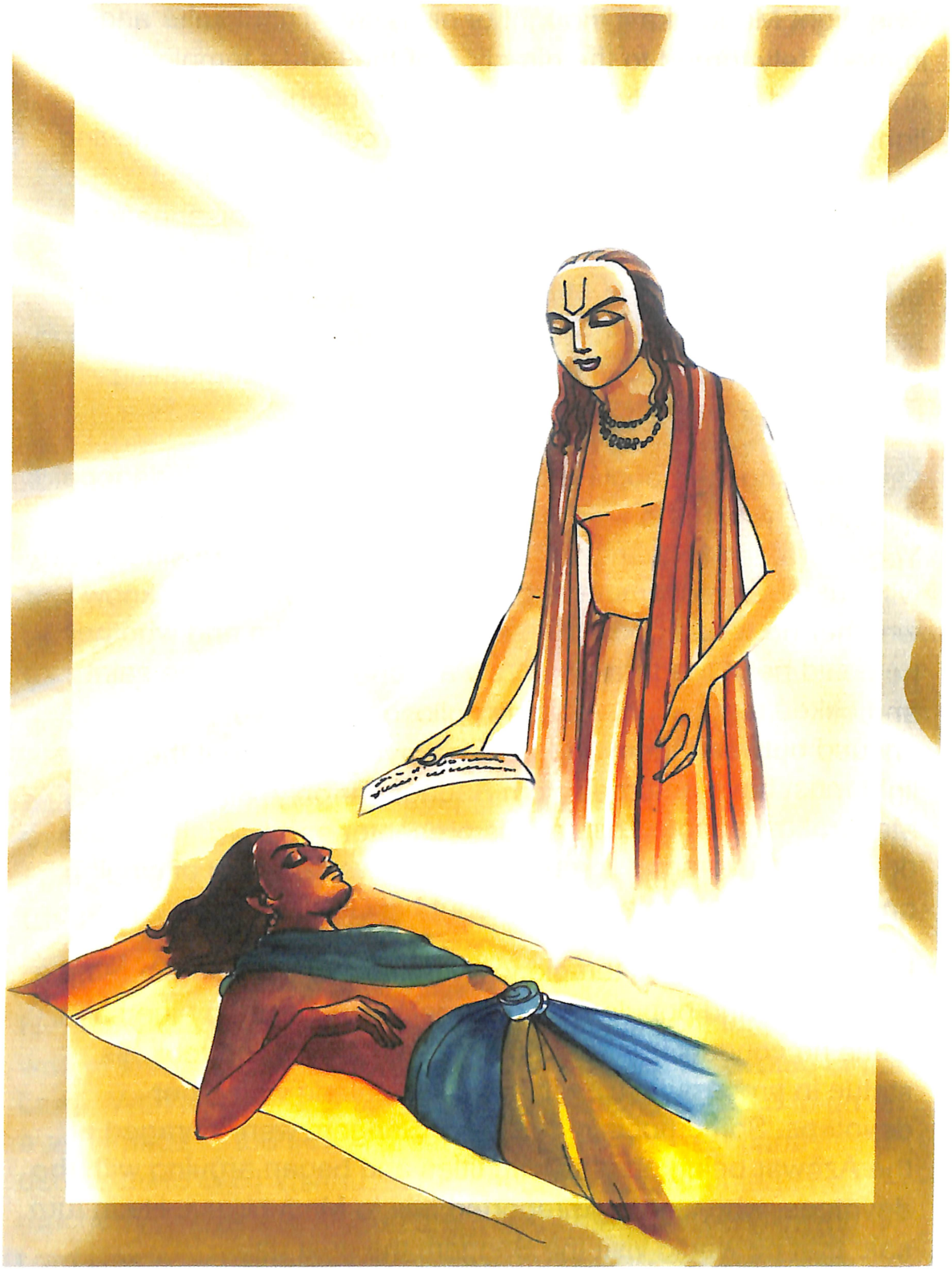
He became well versed in Tamil and Sanskrit scriptures and was of immaculate conduct in addition to being a devotee of the Lord. With no interest in worldly pleasures, he decided to go on a pilgrimage to the seven great holy centres of the country dedicated to Lord Vishnu. In the course of his pilgrimage he reached Ayodya and stayed there for some time worshipping Lord Rama.

One night Madurakavi thought of his native Thirukkolur and immediately turned to the direction of the Lord's temple there and prayed. Suddenly there appeared a bright spot of divine light in the south; as he followed it with curiosity it kept moving southwards through the entire night and disappeared at daybreak. Madurakavi stayed on where the light disappeared. The next night too the same thing happened and continued night after night, till it led him to Thirukurugoor in the Pandya kingdom; there the light disappeared when it reached the shrine of the Lord. Madurakavi realized that there was something unique about that temple.

On enquiring the people around, he was told about Sadagopar (Nammazhwar) who was under the tamarind tree there in Yoganidra; the sixteen year old saint had been there since birth without food, movement and even speech. Wishing to know whether he would open his eyes and look at him and whether he could hear, Madurakavi threw a stone in front of the saint and asked a question. A highly philosophic conversation ensued between them and Madurakavi realized that the divine light must have emerged from Sadagopar only. Since then Madurakavi adopted him as his preceptor and Lord. He wrote down all the verses sung by Nammazhwar; instead of singing on the Lord, he wrote verses about his Guru.

He then built a small temple for Nammazhwar within the temple of the Lord and popularized the poetry composed by the saint. Once he conducted a festival for Nammzhwar and took his statue in procession singing his praise along with other devotees. Some poets of the Tamil Sangam were enraged at the Azhwar being praised with titles and began arguing with the devotees, who went and reported this to Madurakavi. He in turn said that he would visit the Sangam the next day.

Koviloor Digital Library

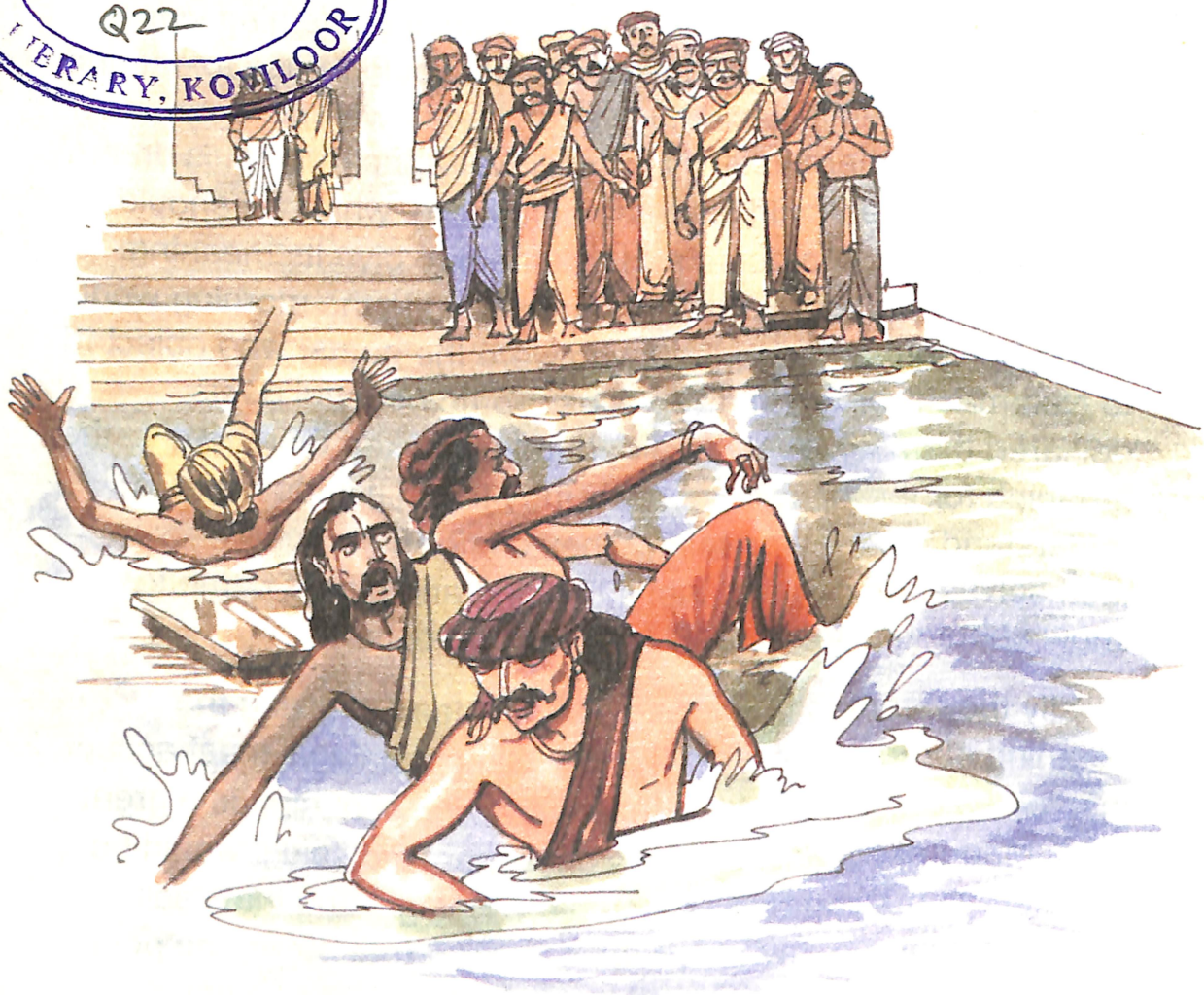


After completing the festival, Madurakavi went and stood in front of the Azhwar; he pleaded that unless something was done to teach a lesson to the poets, he would refuse to eat and might even commit suicide. He stretched down and went into a deep slumber there itself. Nammazhwar appeared in his dream and said that he would leave a poem there, which he should take to the Sangam poets and ask them to give its meaning. Madurakavi woke up to find the poem and in the morning went to the Sangam and enquired who were the poets, who objected to Nammazhwar being given titles. Some boastful poets declared themselves. When Madurakavi asked them to give the meaning for the Azhwar's poem, they found it impossible to understand the real meaning. They conferred among themselves and decided that if the king and others came to know about this, they would lose their respect.

Finally they went to Madurakavi and instead of giving the meaning of the poem, said that the Sangappalagai must accept the verses of the Azhwar, if they were to accept him as a great poet. Madurakavi accepted the challenge and said it would be sufficient to put just one poem on the Palagai and that itself would show the Azhwar's greatness. He wrote down one poem of Nammazhwar and put it on the Palagai and the Sangam poets also sat on it; the Palagai titled them all out into the tank and carried just the palm leaf with the poem and reducing itself to the size of the palm leaf, floated on the water. The poets were ashamed of their behaviour and sang in praise of the Azhwar considering that, that was the only way to atone for their sin. All of them sang one after another but all the poems came out as a single one in the style known as 'Nerisai Venba', which stunned and scared them.

Koviloor Digital Library

LOOR ANJAVAR
A. No...11155...
Q22
LIBRARY, KOVILOOR



They acknowledged their mistake to Madurakavi and requested him to continue to conduct the festival and spread Nammazhwar's greatness all over the world. Feeling pleased that he had been able to correct the poets, Madurakavi went on with his service to his Lord and explained the meaning and significance of the verses of the Azhwar to everyone for many years , before he died and reached Lord Vishnu's feet.

Koviloor Digital Library

Koviloor Digital Library

AZHWARS

THE VAISHNAVITE SAINTS

Lord Vishnu has been worshipped by numerous great devotees from all over India, who had reached a saintly status. The twelve devotees, known as Azhwars, from Tamil Nadu, were believed to be the incarnations of the various aspects of the Lord. For the Azhwars the devotion to their Lord was the very breath of their lives. These are historical figures and their great poetry, compiled together as Nalayira Divyaprabandam, stands as a testimony of their unflinching faith.

The stories of the Azhwars have been part of the literary and philosophical feed that many of the Tamil people have lived and grown up on. These have been rendered in this volume in simple language by Lakshmi Venkatraman, accompanied by the beautiful illustrations by Lalitha Thyagarajan.

KALAKSHETRA PRESS
84 Kalakshetra Road
Thiruvanmiyur
Chennai - 600041
Phone/Fax:: 044-24911390
e-mail : koviloor@hotmail.com

Koviloor Adinam Vedanta Centre Inc.
2 Sparrow Drive
Princeton Junction
New Jersey, USA
Phone: (609) 443-8797
e-mail: koviloorusa@yahoo.com